

## CHILDHOOD OF SIX INDIAN ARTISTS

MADURAI SHANMUKHAVADIVU SUBBULAKSHMI

Gouri R.

Her head rests on a down-turned basket on the floor. Her thick, incredibly curly hair is spread over it after the customary oil bath. As the incense fumes rise from the live coals under the basket, the black waves seem endless and enchanting. The face they frame turns ethereal. Diamond sparks from ear and nose intensify the fragrant dream.

When she rises from cloudy repose, she knots her hair, tucks jasmine flowers into its folds, sits before the gods in the puja room, and sings with her eyes closed, slender fingers gliding over the tanpura. I become even more convinced that grandaunt Kunjamma is a celestial being. How else could she be so radiantly beautiful? So gentle and sweet? Or move with such grace? How else could she make music which thrilled you all over?

At that time, I was too young to realize that she was the idol of hundreds of thousands as the celebrated musician M.S. Subbulakshmi. But I did know the legends of goddesses who came to earth on special missions. Now in my adulthood, stripped of childish fancies and credulous faith, I am still unable to shake off that adoration. I certainly see it reflected in the sea of faces in the concert hall, looking up at the lady on the dais. To them, she is not merely a performer, not even a saintly singer. She is goddess incarnate. It is not human art but divine grace which manifests itself through her voice.

That voice has been rated peerless from the shy days of her debut when it soared like the high-pitched notes of a bird in springtime. Later, the ravishing trills were weighted with the stately grandeur and sonorous devotion of the classical tradition. Few other artists have been as successful as Subbulakshmi in the melding of the conscious and the unconscious, the inborn and the reflective elements of her art.

She plumbs the depths and scales the heights of the raga, dwelling resoundingly on the *gandhara* of the upper register, circling it with phrases pure and brilliant. She may drown you in hymnal fervour as she repeats the line '*Ojagajanani, manonmani, omkara rupini, kalyani*'...' The listener is lost in a trance. He doesn't realize that the ecstasy is founded on technical mastery, marathon training and phenomenal control. Perhaps this was at the back of his mind when the Hindustani maestro Bade Ghulam Ali Khan called her 'Suswaralakshmi, Subhalakshmi'.

And if you pay attention to anything she sings from her vast, still-increasing repertoire in many languages and in several musical forms, from Telugu *kriti* (song) to Marathi *abhang* (devotional song), you can see how much diction, breath control and thoughtful modulation contribute to the transcendence which characterizes her music. Meticulousness is a constant factor in everything she does. Her unquestioning faith in God is equalled by her unfailing commitment to her art.

National and international leaders, fellow artists and celebrities from every walk of life rank among her admirers. For an artist who has never given a single interview, letting her

music speak for itself, Subbulakshmi has received unprecedented press coverage. The public adulation is evoked not only for her music but for the other worldly qualities she represents. Indian thought identifies these with the *Bhakti* tradition where art is only a vehicle for seeking and finding God.

It is well known that shortly before his assassination, Mahatma Gandhi requested M.S. Subbulakshmi to record his favourite *bhajan* for him. She did not know that song. But how could she not learn it for him when Bapu said he would rather hear her *speak* the song than someone else *sing* it?

More and more of her fans tell her that listening to her songs, live or recorded, has brought them good fortune, averted mishaps, replaced physical or mental ailments with peace of mind. I cannot forget a dear friend who repeatedly asked me to sing any ‘M.S.’ music as she faced death from third-degree burns.

In real life, Subbulakshmi is an extremely traditional and conservative woman of her generation. She is quite unaware of the trails she has blazed, or her pioneering achievements. She was the first woman recipient of the ‘Sangita Kalanidhi’ title (1968) from the Music Academy, Madras. She is perhaps the only Carnatic musician who is popular in north India. And it was she who introduced the splendours of Carnatic music to the West at the Edinburgh Festival (1963) and at the United Nations(1966).With husband Thiagarajan Sadasivam to guide her, M.S. Subbulakshmi has raised over three crores of rupees for charity through her concerts.

Other quiet revolutions include playing the male role of Narada in the film *Savitri* (1941).This was to raise money for launching *Kalki*, her husband’s nationalist Tamil weekly.

Her title role of the Rajasthani saint-poetess Meera in the film of that name (1947) gave her national prominence.

Cult figure and consummate artist that she is, Subbulakshmi continues to give concerts at age eighty. She can still hit the gandhara in the upper octave and make you soar with her.

Yes, grandaunt Kunjamma is an inspiring role model, not only for the miracle of her music, but because she represents in her simple, everyday life, the values of an ancient culture: humility, compassion, consideration for others and unwavering principles of conduct. Her quest for perfection, sincerity of effort and concentration are not reserved for the stage. They are visible in the camphor light that she circles around the gods and gurus in her puja room. That is why she fills you with the same rapture when she sings a prayer at home, as she does on the concert stage with her eyes-closed finale ‘*Kumi onrum illai*’—‘Lord, I have no regrets’.

### SONGBIRD IN SPRINGTIME

Grandmothers are best at telling stories about things which happened once upon a time, long, long ago. I too am a grandmother now, and I would like to begin with a story.

Once upon a time, long, long ago, King Malayadhvaja ruled over the Pandya Empire which spread across the land of the Tamils. His capital was Madurai, city of temples and towers, in the deep south of India. The king had everything his heart could desire. But he

had no child to make him happy. Therefore, on the advice of holy men, he performed a great *yagna* to the gods.

As the priests chanted the Vedas, and poured ghee into the fire, a little girl rose from the golden blaze. She was as beautiful as the full moon shining in the starry sky. That is how the goddess came to Madurai as a human child. The delighted king named her Minakshi.

When she grew up, Princess Minakshi decided to expand the Pandya Empire. Gathering an army as vast as the oceans, she set out on a war of conquest. Wherever she went, she was victorious.

Finally, the princess reached the Himalayas. She decided to storm Mount Kailasa, the home of Lord Siva. But when Minakshi looked at the god in all his glory, the arrow dropped from her hand. Siva too was overwhelmed by Minakshi's beauty.

However, it was not in the Himalayas but down in Madurai that their marriage was celebrated. To win Minakshi, Siva had to give up his snakes and ashes. He carne dressed in gold and silks as the handsome Sundaresvara, a fit groom for the Pandya princess!

So now you know that Madurai, my home town, is no ordinary place!

As a child I was often taken to see the puja at the Minakshi temple. I remember gazing at the splendid image in the inner chamber. When the priest circled burning camphor round her face, I could see the beautiful eyes of the goddess. They were full of love, full of sweet blessings. So you see, faith and prayer came to me in childhood. It was part of the way I was brought up.

Eater, when I became a concert singer, I would sometimes sing in praise of Minakshi. When I repeated the line '*'Madurapuri nilaye...'* ' which described her as the deity of Madurai town, I would always remember the long and lovely eyes of the goddess which had thrilled me as a child.

I spent my childhood in a tiny house wedged between a row of tightly packed houses. This was in Hanumantharayan Street, very close to the Minakshi temple. Oh yes, it is still there! The street is just as narrow, dusty and crowded now as it was in those days. The little lane was often occupied by cows which refused to budge. Certainly no cars could get by. The cows would sit comfortably and chew on, pretending not to hear the shouts and the honks.

But it was a special place for musicians because of my mother, Shanmukhavadi. She played the veena. It is an ancient musical instrument. In paintings and temple carvings you will see it in the hands of Goddess Saraswati. The tone of the veena is both rich and sweet. It is supposed to calm the mind, and bring good thoughts. I know this is true because that is how I felt when my mother practised and performed on the stage.

The initials before my name stand for the two influences on my life—M for my hometown Madurai, and S for my mother Shanmukhavadi. She was my first guru. It was she who made me the singer I am today.

We were poor, but rich in music. I was brought up with music all around me. Singing came more naturally to me than talking. I was a timid child. Mother's strict discipline made me even more silent. Mother wouldn't let me or my sister Vadivambal step out of the house unnecessarily. In fact she didn't like it if we stood too long near the front door,

or looked out of the window. My brother Saktivel had a little more freedom because he was a boy. We girls had to be satisfied with indoor games. With these restrictions how could I make friends?

Our home was very small—two rooms, a kitchen and a courtyard. A staircase went up to the terrace on top. Our house was always packed with elderly aunts and uncles who were often sick. We had to be quieter then. Our life was simple and frugal. We had coriander coffee in the morning—made by boiling roasted coriander seeds to which a dash of milk and jaggery were added. We had rice and buttermilk at night. I was very fond of jasmines. But we couldn't afford to buy flowers everyday. And candy PVadiva and I would pound tamarind, chillies and salt together, roll it into little balls and put a stick through each one. There was our lollipop!

I never felt we lacked things. Didn't we have each other? Learning music was fun because we three children learnt and practised together. I would sing, Vadiva would play the veena and brother Saktivel would make the room echo with his mridangam. His drumming was so good that I actually learnt to play the mridangam from him. We would laugh and talk as we practised. But mother's footsteps were enough to make us fall silent. She did not tolerate distractions of that sort.

When I was a child, television was of course a thing of the distant future. Films were few and something to talk about with open-mouthed wonder. I never saw any.

In those days there was a popular art form called *harikatha*, which drew the evening crowds to a temple courtyard or marriage pandal. A narrator called the *Bhagavatar* held the listeners spellbound with legends and epics. These tellers of tales were linguists and scholars who knew verses from many languages—Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu, Hindi and Marathi. This made their stories more fascinating, especially as they set the verses to music and sang soulfully. Some of the Bhagavatars were such experts in music that professional musicians came to hear them.

*Harikatha* was usually performed by men, but there were a few women who excelled in the art. Saraswati Bai was a famous 'star' among them. Like the many artists of those times, she was deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. She became a supporter of the Indian National Congress, and spoke eloquently about the campaigns it launched to free India from British rule.

Once I was taken to hear Saraswati Bai. That day her discourse described the gathering of Rama's army of monkeys on the sea shore. Suddenly Vibhishana appeared in the sky, fleeing from Lanka to surrender himself to Rama. Bai painted the whole scene with a rousing fervour. And then she burst into a song in Raga Khamas, in Adi tala (a time cycle of eight beats). Most unexpectedly, it was in English! This is the occasion, for our liberation. This is Congress Resolution, Gandhiji's inspiration.

It was a terrific blast which rose to a crescendo with the crash of drums, chipla bells and cymbals. Perhaps the lady thought she had to sing in English to make the British understand and tremble!

After the last note of the ringing challenge, Saraswati Bai thundered in Tamil prose: 'And that is how Vibhishana fell from the sky, at the feet of the Lord!' And that is

when I felt my mother's sharp pinch, admonishing me to stop giggling and behave—or else...!

I began to read and write before I was sent to school. This happened in a very strange manner. As a child I would get up very early and stand outside the doorway, watching women cleaning the doorstep. They would sprinkle water on the patch of the street in front of their homes, smear cow dung over it and begin to draw the most beautiful designs with rice flour. These were called *kolam*.

One day an old man walked down the street and passed me by. He wore a saffron dhoti and ash marks on forehead and arms, a *rudraksha* round his neck. He carried a bronze jug, the *kamandala*. I don't know why, but I liked him on sight. He looked pious and kind-hearted. I continued to see him everyday after that—fresh from his bath, with the same sweet smile for me.

One day he stopped. 'Child, I want to teach you. Will you learn?' he asked. I nodded happily. He promptly sat down on the doorstep. He closed his eyes, folded his hands (I did the same) and began with a *shloka*, 'Ghrita guda payasam'

What do you think he taught me? Not Sanskrit, the language of the scriptures. Not Tamil, my mother tongue. He taught me a script called Grantha—so old that nobody uses it anymore. You can find it only in old books, and on the walls of temples. Or on copper plates which were used in olden days to keep accounts and records!

My family watched these 'classes' with astonishment. Perhaps they were amused by this white-haired man teaching a tiny tot like me. But no one stopped us. In those days, old and learned persons were respected, even if they were poor wandering souls. But Vadiva and Sakti found it impossible not to laugh when they saw him. They teased me dreadfully. Sakti started referring to him as 'Old dhritakula payasam', after the funny sounding prayer he recited each day. But we continued our classes till the old man went back to Benares, from where he had come south on a pilgrimage. That is how an old man whose name I never knew, became my first guru, and Grantha the first script I learnt!

After this I was sent to a proper school where I studied up to class five. I might have continued but for a severe beating I got from a teacher, for no reason I could understand. The fright made my whooping cough so much worse that my elders at home decided to stop my schooling.

Did I miss school? Not really. I was scared of my teachers and classmates. Staying at home was a relief.

But you must not think my education was over. There was so much to learn from my own mother. Actually, though I always think of her as my first guru, she never sat down and taught me music. It was more a matter of picking up as she practised and taught students, and singing with her as she played the veena.

My mother chose a music teacher for me. This was Srinivasa Iyengar who gave concerts with his brother. On an auspicious day and hour, a small puja was done at home; a coconut was cracked and offered in worship. I prostrated myself before my guru and my mother. Then I sat down on the mat for my first lesson. My guru checked the tambura strings. They were correctly tuned. He began to pluck them. He sang out loud and clear: 'Sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa . . . , ' I repeated the notes after him in three speeds. I must have done well because he taught me with great interest. He laid a proper foundation by going

through the beginner's exercises—*sarali varisai, alankaram and gitam*. Sadly, he did not live to guide me for long. He went out of town on some work. Soon after we heard that he had passed way. This was unfortunate. But it did not end my fascination for music. I practised for long hours and with great involvement. I made up a sort of game for myself. I would tune the tambura carefully. As I plucked the strings, the resonance would cast a spell over me. Eyes closed, I would be lost in another world. Then I would stop, sing without it, and pluck the strings again to check if I had stayed in tune. Throughout the day, in between household jobs, I would return to the tambura several times to see if I could recall that pitch steadily and accurately.

Singing on stage happened so naturally that it seemed to be the only thing for me. You will laugh when you hear how I 'appeared before the public' for the first time.

My mother gave a concert at the Setupati School near our home. I was building mud palaces in the backyard when somebody, perhaps my uncle, picked me up, dusted my skirt, washed my hands, and carried me straight to the stage. There were some fifty listeners in the hall. In those days it was quite a large gathering! But I was used to seeing my mother play before people. I was put down next to her. My mother asked me to sing. At once, without the least hesitation, I sang one or two songs. I was too young for the smiles and applause to mean much. In fact, I was wondering how soon I could get back to making mud pies!

My love of music was fanned by the atmosphere in our house. My mother didn't take me to too many concerts by other musicians. But they often came to our house. Great musicians like Karaikudi Sambasiva Iyer, Mazhavarayanendal Subbarama Bhagavatar and Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar would drop in. Their names may sound difficult to you, but their music was like mountain honey. Pure and sweet.

These artists would sit down, drink coffee, roll *paan* and tuck it into their cheek, or take a pinch of snuff, and talk endlessly about great music and musicians. One story I heard at that time left its mark on me.

Once a famous musician was scheduled to sing, after a talented youngster. The young man gave a superb performance. With tears in his eyes, the senior musician got up and blessed him. To the organizers he said, 'The young mans music has rained sugar and honey today. I am deeply moved. I can't sing now. Let me come back and sing for everyone tomorrow.' Do you see the large heartedness of the man? Do you see how humble he was? His love of music went beyond thoughts of himself.

The musicians who visited us would often sing or play their instruments. A nod from my mother was like loud applause to them. Sometimes she would pluck the strings and play, and they would listen eagerly. Sometimes these maestros would ask me to sing. They would teach me a song or two. In those days praise was not scattered easily. A nod meant tremendous approval. 'You must do well' meant we had reached a high standard.

Local musicians too would come home to pay their respects to mother. Whenever the temple deity was taken out in procession through the main streets, the nadaswaram players, at the head of the line, would stop where our little street branched off. Then they would play their best for mother. I would run out and watch. I would be entranced by the sights and sounds. The gods were gorgeously bedecked in silks and jewels and flowers. There was chanting. And the majestic melody of the nadaswaram pipes rose with the big

tavil drums. That kind of music is perhaps gone forever. Veena players were always anxious to impress mother. Once, when such a musician came home, somehow Sakti and I guessed that he would be quite awful. And we were right.

The veena is a delicate instrument. It has to be plucked and stroked gently. But this man pulled and grabbed and pushed and banged. What made it worse was that he had chosen to play an old, soulful raga called Sahana. And he chose to repeat the words, '*Rakshasa Bhima*.' You know what it means! Just imagine listening to a noisy player repeating the words, 'a gigantic demon'. I choked as I stifled my giggles. Vadiva arid Sakti were just as bad. Mother glared icily at us. But how could we stop laughing, especially when, at an explosive twang, the string broke and curled up with a squeak!

At another time we had a musician who played the jalatarangam for us (*jal* means water and *tarangam* mean wave). The instrument consists of a set of china bowls, each filled with a different level of water. The player taps the bowls with two sticks and there you have it—water music! It is like the tinkling of little bells.

I also listened to a lot of music on the radio. We didn't own one, but if I sat by the window halfway up the staircase, I could hear our neighbour's radio clearly. That is how I got introduced to Hindustani music. How enchanting it was to hear Abdul Karim Khan, Amir Khan or Paluskar, their voices sweetened by the silence of the night.

Hindustani music was not unknown to us in the south. The Maratha kings who had ruled over Tanjavur had made it popular among music lovers. I learnt Hindustani music for a while from Pandit Narayan Rao Vyas. This was to help me a lot when I grew up and acted in the film Meera. Then I had the privilege of singing Meerabai's songs. '*Shyama Sundara Madana Mohana*' was one of the songs that Pandit Vyas taught me. It was to become a hit when I sang it in *Seva Sadan*—a film based on Munshi Premchand's novel.

Living a sheltered life as I did, what could I know of fashions? The only 'cosmetics' I had were turmeric powder and grain flour. There was *kajal* for the eyes and *chaandu*—red and black paste stored in coconut shells, with which we made dots on the forehead. And of course coconut oil. Mother used to get quite tired as she rubbed oil into my hair on Tuesdays and Fridays. Then she would spread my hair out on the stone where we washed our clothes, and wash it with *shikakai*. My hair was long and thick and extremely curly. I smile when I see the corkscrew curls in my old photographs!

From the staircase window, I would watch the world outside. That is how I saw the girls in the opposite house getting ready to go out. They were dabbing something on their faces which made them white. Of course I didn't know it was face powder. I rubbed my hands along the whitewashed wall and tried the effect on my face. You can imagine how irritated my mother was when she caught me at it. Her 'Don't be stupid!' came with a slap.

I must tell you that street sounds were very different then from what you hear now. There was much less noise. Many more hawkers and vendors came by. They sold all kinds of goods, from vegetables to bangles. Then there was the man with the performing monkey; the snake charmer with his small pipe called magudi which played an eerie tune; the 'Govinda' man who rolled across the street in yellow robes, as he collected alms to go to the Tirupati temple; the 'bhoom-bhoom maadu' or the bull which told fortunes... each had his own way of singing and reciting. I remember the songs of the beggars. Never film

songs but catchy folk tunes. The beggar who made nightly rounds used to sing a haunting Hindustani tune!

I was also fascinated by records—gramophone ‘plates’ we called them. Inspired by the gramophone company’s logo of the dog listening to his master’s voice, I would pick up a sheet of paper; roll it into a long cone, arid sing into it for hours. This dream came true sooner than I expected when my mother took me to Madras to cut my first disc. I was ten years old and sang in an impossibly high pitch!

I lost my father at about the same time. He was a lawyer. His heart was not in the court, but in his puja room with Sri Rama. Every year he would celebrate the Rama Navami festival with great love and care. The picture of Rama, decorated beautifully with flowers, would be taken through the streets in a grand procession. This was on the *saarattu*, an open, horse-drawn buggy. How proud I felt when father picked me up and made me sit with him on that saarattu! After the rounds the picture would be carefully taken into the house, and after the puja, father would lead the group singing of bhajans. Then came what all the children waited for: the distribution of *Prasad*!

As a child I had a pet name. Everyone called me Kunjamma which meant ‘little girl’. But my father had another special name for me. It was always ‘Kajaathi, my little princess!’ He was very proud of my singing. He would say that he would get me married only to someone who would cherish my music. Then he would laugh and tease, ‘So how about a nice boy who plays the tambura? Do you fancy such a husband?’

I have one more green memory to share. Dakshinamurti Pillai was an awe-inspiring musician of those times. He played the mridangam and the ghatam. A wedding in his family drew a whole galaxy of musicians. Young and old, they came to his hometown Pudukkottai, not only to attend the function, but also to perform their best before the veteran, I was a young girl then, but I was given the chance to sing in that assembly. The next day, as we took leave of him, Pillai made us sit down. He turned to his fellow musicians, many of them top performers of the time. He said, ‘You heard this child yesterday. No fuss, no show, no fireworks. Didn’t she sing straight from the heart and give us excellent, wholesome music? That is the kind of music which will always stay fresh, and last through a lifetime.’

I was so overcome by these words that I shrank behind mother and tried to turn invisible. But he-called me forward and gave his blessings.

Right from childhood, just as I felt devotion towards God, I felt a deep respect for my elders. Whenever something good happened, I believed it was due to their good wishes. And I must say that right through my life I was lucky to get their blessings.

My first important performance as a singer was at the Music Academy in Madras. It was to be a full-fledged, three-hour concert there before an audience of musicians, critics and music lovers. I was eighteen. I shivered and trembled before the event. Trying not to look at the listeners, I went up to the stage, sat down, checked the tuning of the tambura, and began.

Suddenly, my fears fell away. I sang with joy. Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavat, a well-known singer, had been sitting at the back. He got up and came to the front row, loudly expressing his approval. Others too were quick to say ‘*Bhesh! Bhesh!*’ and

*'Shabhash!* I treasure the words of the great veena player Sambasiva Iyer. He said, 'Subbulakshmi? Why, she carries a veena in her throat!'

That concert at the Music Academy was a very big step for me—a step towards a lifetime of singing. And of devotion and service through that pursuit of music.

### MAQBOOL FIDA HUSAIN

'To my mind the most interesting thing in art is the personality of the artist; and if that is singular, I am willing to excuse a thousand faults,' says Somerset Maugham in *The Moon and Sixpence*.

What do you think of the artist who completes an elaborate painting—and washes it back to white again? Three generations of Indians have found Maqbool Fida Husain quirky and irresistibly provocative. Star and showman that he is, Husain has fuelled that interest with regular exhibitions of eccentricity and caprice. With his striking features framed by a bushy halo (now a venerable white), Husain is a photographer's delight. He sparks the kind of controversy the press loves to blow up. He has only to go barefoot to hit the headlines.

Husain walks tall. He has lived to see himself a runaway success in the art market. In fact his market savviness is more astounding than his tireless invention.

Honours, awards and acclaim have not lagged behind either. Great moments include his exhibition at the Sao Paolo Biennale in Brazil (1971) where he was a special guest with Pablo Picasso. He even won the Golden Bear in Berlin (1967) for his documentary 'Through the Eyes of a Painter'.

Husain has been more reviled and disparaged than any other Indian artist. He is accused of making his public see the emperor in clothes that simply do not exist. He once strewed the walls of an art gallery with kilometres of white homespun cloth and the floors with newspapers, to signify serenity above and shocks below. As early as 1968 Husain decided to turn painting into performance. At the Shridharani Art Gallery, New Delhi, large evening crowds watched as he worked on six canvasses—simultaneously!

At age eighty he declared that movie star Madhuri Dixit had 'stirred his instincts' as she cavorted in the rollicking blockbuster *Hum Apke Hain Kaun*. Not content with extolling her as the Eternal Woman in serigraphs, he painted the star on a live horse as well.

With his love of music it was natural for Husain to contemporize the tradition of raga painting. Steeped as he is in Urdu poetry, Husain's romantic metaphors described paintings as fragments of music, and the art of painting as the orchestration of notes struck upon the artist's personality. But who could predict that the man would stand in packed concert halls and transpose the music of Bhimsen Joshi onto canvas visuals? When Yesudas sang the '*Vatapi ganapatim*'—a popular composition in Raga Hamsadhwam"—Husain accompanied him with paint and brush. The elephant god appeared, not on the usual mouse, but riding a horse!

For Husain painting is not a silent act in a sealed room. It is an exuberant happening in an intense present. Sharing gives a keen edge to his own enjoyment. Through the prolific years his lines, colours and imagery have remained bold, even brazen. Husain's modernism is neither derived nor abstruse. It strives for a primal simplicity. It taps the icon, symbol and sign—at times flat and plain, at other times bristling—with subtle undertones. He has the child's innocence and guile. His poetic expressionism can make you taste every shade of feeling as if for the first time.

Husain does not have ten generations of artists behind him. His career choice was a revolutionary step for the small-town, middle-class boy. All the same, he claimed a vast and resplendent heritage. His myth-making convinces us because it accommodates the religious, social and cultural traditions of this ancient subcontinent. Glitch and folk are as much grist to his mill as are the classical modes of the West or the Far East. From the stark to the subtle, from the mundane to the mystic—Husain spurns nothing along the way. He is as much at home with the haute monde in Paris as with the hawkers in Pandharpur. Born into a civilization which revels in pluralism, he retains the particular even as he amplifies the universal within. That is how he places Mariam beside Krishna, and turns 'The Night before Christmas' into an Indian parable.

Husain has a sense of humour. You can see it in all his work—from satire in some of his British Raj paintings to the mischief of his multi-mood umbrellas. Or it can be a chatty moment, a naughty glint as he asks you, 'Look at my nose and chin. Don't I look like a Maratha chieftain?'

A few years ago I found myself in an old house in Calcutta. As my eyes adjusted to the dust and dark, quite suddenly, I saw rough lines writhing on the wall before me. Scratched on impulse may be—with the quick charge and sure fire of the cave painters of prehistory. Horses! Creatures of light and grace. Flaunting their power and strength. They bucked and reared and pranced and stamped. In that moment, before Husain's horses, nature, memory and myth become one.

At his best Husain does not present an experience. He plunges you headlong into the act as it happens—here, now, and always—with an insouciance undimmed through the greying years.

### **A BIOSCOPE, A STEED AND A SKETCHBOOK**

Human faces—I wonder if there is anything in the world more fascinating than the human face. Among the millions of people who have lived on earth for thousands of years, no two faces are exactly alike. And therefore, are you surprised to know that my earliest memories are of faces? Faces of persons I knew and persons I didn't know except as faces drawn in my mind?

Some of those faces live and breathe. Others are like flat line drawings. Even now, when I see an interesting face in a newspaper or magazine, I cut it out and keep it.

My earliest recollections are effaces bending over me when I was one or two years old. By age four I was drawing the faces I saw at home, on the street, and in the market-place. By the time I was five, I was sketching all the time, scribbling wherever I could—on paper, books, wall and floor. My favourite models were faces which had something extra on them like glasses, moustaches or beards.

I think my obsession with faces was not due to the variety in their features. It was their expressions that intrigued me. You see, even the same face does not always look the same. So many feelings fade in and out and chase one another ever changingly.

I was born in 1915 in Pandharpur, Maharashtra. The town is the home of Lord Panduranga Vithala, or Vithoba as he is lovingly —'known. Though born in a Muslim family, I did not feel different from the rest of the townsmen who were Hindus. It was because in language and lifestyle we were really Maharashtrians. My *mami* (maternal aunt) sold vegetables in the market, wearing the *nauvari* (nine yards) saree. We spoke Marathi at home, not Urdu. Our family certainly knew no Persian or Arabic. Vithoba was not a stranger to us. When we swore in the name of God we said '*devaachi shapat*' as the Hindus did. Deva referred to God, to Vithoba in fact. We did not say '*Khuda ki kasam*' as the Urdu speaking Muslims did.

My mother, Zainab, died when I was two years old. I had fallen seriously ill and her desperate prayer was that her life should be taken and mine spared. That is exactly what happened. Though alive I counted myself extremely unfortunate. Can anyone make up for the loss of a mother? I don't even have a picture of her. She refused to get herself photographed. In those days people were afraid of the camera. They thought it cast an evil eye and shortened life. Sadly, I have nothing which remotely resembles or reminds me of my mother. She is just a name to me, not even a memory.

Soon after mother's death my family moved from Pandharpur to Indore in Madhya Pradesh. Four years later my father married again. I distinctly and vividly remember my father's wedding. And my stepmother came to live with us.

I did not resent lather's marriage. But a strange woman coming to live in our home—I never got used to that. I saw it as an intrusion. To be fair to her, I must say she was a good person—she tried to be kind to me. More than once she came to my rescue when lather got angry with me. She often stopped him from beating me. But I could never feel close to her.

My father Fida Husain worked as an accountant in a textile mill. He had a stable job and an income of two hundred rupees per month. I think that is why a traditional Muslim family like my stepmother's gave her in marriage to him.

On the whole I had a happy childhood. There was no dearth of playmates as I had four sisters and four brothers. None of them showed any interest in painting. In fact no one in my family had ever wanted to paint. But they had other uses. My eldest step-sister Dilbar was my most frequent model for portraits. She died before the age of thirty. We were very close to each other and I still miss her.

I studied in Indore High School up to class nine. In between I was sent to a boarding school in Baroda for religious instruction in Islam. Abbas Tyabji, a disciple of Gandhiji, was the patron of that school. The Tyabji family members were educated upper-class folk, and opinion-makers in Baroda. They were fiercely patriotic, giving up their wealth and comfortable lifestyle to join the freedom struggle. Though that school taught Islamic studies, the uniform we wore was pure homespun *khadi*.

When I look back, I realize that the nationalist movement also meant Hindu-Muslim unity. We were brought up on those ideals. That is why, when our country was

partitioned into India and Pakistan, our family never thought of emigration. We felt we belonged to the place where we had lived for generations.

For me the choice was very clear. I could never go to Pakistan where my painting would be banned. In fact even in Indore where I grew up in a typical orthodox Muslim community, there was a hue and cry about my painting. ‘This is not right. What you are doing is against our religion,’ said the ustadhs and the mullahs.

But my father, strict as he was in many things, never smoking or touching alcohol, would not stop me from painting. He encouraged me and defended me. He had progressive views. In those days no woman could go out without a *burkha*. My father was the first to take his wife to the movies without that *burkha*. Finally the neighbourhood came to accept his ways. Father was a very kind and generous man, the sort who would rush to help anyone who needed it. He had an open house and welcomed everyone. He was loved by the whole community. And so they decided to overlook his ‘whims’.

My passion for painting became so overwhelming that I lost interest in everything else. My hand kept moving on paper, making shapes and patterns. I painted on broken bits of crockery and on the floor, imitating the traditions of Gujarat and Rajasthan. Shireen, my stepmother, came from Gujarat. That is how I went there during holidays and was exposed to different scenes, customs and people. I used to carry a sketch pad with me always. Whenever something caught my fancy, I would whip it out and draw feverishly. I would sit on the street day-dreaming and suddenly I would see a face which galvanized me into activity. I drew all kinds of people. Sometimes I would ‘set up’ my subject. I would beg my cousin to dress like a fakir and paint him. I liked to walk round the streets and the narrow lanes, making sketches of buses and trams, tongas and carts, and people engaged in various activities. I did not seek gardens and parks so much though I did cycle to find visuals for my landscape painting.

There was no one to look at my paintings, no one to make any comment, favourable or unfavourable. My father was merely indulgent. He was not a connoisseur. Yet I went on painting. I even sold my school books to buy paints.

As a child I read a lot. I was attracted to ideas.

That is why all kinds of religious thought and philosophy interested me. My feeling for poetry was fanned by my uncle Zakir Ali Zia. He was a poet himself. He wrote about the human condition, about the plight of man, not romantic poetry. His *nazms* (a form of poetry) had a hymnal quality.

At the Indore school nothing interested me except literature. I also enjoyed learning languages. What drove me to study Gujarati, Hindi and Marathi (and later Sanskrit, Persian and Urdu) was my love of their literature. I never did believe in degrees and diplomas, not even in painting. That is why I rejected father’s suggestion that I should join the J. J. School of Art in Bombay. What its final year students were doing, I could do without attending a single class.

As a child I wrote poems in Hindi. Later I began to write in English. How thrilled I was when my English poems were published in Switzerland! I was an adult then, but my joy was as great as a child’s. I studied only up to class nine, dropping out of school after that. But I did write that book of poems!

If you have real passion, you can do anything.

Though I never paid attention to studies I was very popular in school. The children liked my paintings. They had fun watching me draw caricatures of teachers. At age eleven I could draw portraits. At school functions I would draw special pictures on the blackboard. For instance, I drew an enormous head of Mahatma Gandhi on his birthday. I made models of buildings which won prizes in competitions. They were elaborate affairs made of cardboard, painted over and fitted with tiny lights in every room. I made tableaux inside and within the compound—of people, animals, trees and plants.

I was a very quiet child. I had no time for chatter. My hands were always busy painting, modelling or making something. But I did play games—mostly football and tennis. I devised my own kind of squash by hitting the ball against the wall of my room. I organized athletic events in school—running, high jump and so on. I read everything I could about the Olympic Games and imagined that we were world champions on the school playground.

Like me, my father had many interests. Music was one of them. He played a Japanese instrument called the Tesho koto, probably purchased from a wandering Japanese tradesman. It had strings—some to be struck with a plastic plectrum, some to be finger-tapped. Father did not ‘perform’. He played to enjoy himself, trying out old tunes, making up his own *dhun* (tune) as he went along. I tried to play, but I never got the hang of it. But I came to love music because the Holkar kings were great patrons of classical *gharana* music, and there were frequent performances. The Indore College too held regular concerts. That is how I got to hear some of the best *dhrupad* and *khyal* (forms of Hindustani music) singers.

Father was also very fond of the theatre. He would take us to see the famous Marathi plays put up by the popular drama companies of those times. I used to be entranced by their spectacles and songs. And Ramlila! It was not street theatre at all but an unforgettable experience. The characters of the old myth took fantastic shapes. It was more than real. It was magical. Much later those shapes and forms urged me to do a serious reading of the Ramayana. I painted them—those gods and heroes and demons. My father was liberal about these things. He did not object to my involvement with the myths of another religion.

In those days travelling shows were very popular. One of them was the ‘bioscope’. A man installed a box in the town or village square and loudly invited the people to take a peep inside. He had an amusing patter. ‘*Dilli ka darbar dekho, Viceroy Curzon ko dekho*’ (‘See the court in Delhi. Look at Viceroy Curzon’). The box had a peep-hole. Through it you could see action pictures. The box was cranked to make a picture-strip move across the frame very swiftly. This created the illusion of motion.

I was so intrigued by it that I constructed my own ‘peep box’—hand crank and all. I drew a strip of six to eight drawings, rather like animation pictures, or those you see in flip books. My invention was a tremendous success and after this I got hooked on photography. We were not rich. But father said, ‘The boy is creative; let him do what he likes.’ He bought me an Agfa camera for five rupees. This interest continued in adulthood. I learnt to compose and to develop my own pictures.

As a child I was always looking for unusual scenes, unique angles. One day the congregation at the mosque caught my eye. I climbed a tree nearby and took pictures of the praying crowds. I was caught and thrashed by my uncle for this ‘sacrilege’. I had been shooting, instead of praying like a good boy.

Father might not have considered this a great offence. But once he too thrashed me hard. I was very fond of silk socks and stole a pair from my uncle’s shop. When father found out, my punishment came behind closed doors and not all my stepmother’s entreaties could stop it.

My obsession with cinema began at that time. In those days middle-class families frowned on novel-reading and film-going. We were allowed to see only one or two films a year. I used to long for those rare occasions. I got to see a few more when my cousin began to come with me.

At first films were silent, which meant that the screen figures did not speak. English films had sub-titles. But for Hindi films two men stood on either side of the screen. One provided music, the other a running commentary! He would not only narrate the story but speak the dialogues too. I saw the first film ever made in India—Dada Saheb came to town,

Phalke’s *Raja Harischandra*. Then came V. Shantaram’s popular hit *Ayodhyachya Raja* with Durga Khote as the heroine.

Whenever a film a man went round the streets on a tonga loudly proclaiming its name and promising marvels and miracles. He distributed illustrated pamphlets. There was always a scramble for them. I used to collect them and also any film magazine I came across. One, called *Mauj Maza*, was in Gujarati. I devoured it from cover to cover and cut out pictures for my collection. This was—the beginning of my more serious interest in film-making techniques and direction. I did get to make a few documentaries eventually.

Strangely enough, it was a film which had the greatest impact on my pursuit of painting—a Dutch film on Rembrandt, with that remarkable character actor Charles Laughton in the lead. I don’t think I can explain how profoundly moved I was by Rembrandt’s ordeals through fire. I wanted to have that same magnificent obsession, that same self-transcending commitment. I too longed to be a portrait painter, not to draw pink cheeks and classic profiles, but to lay bare the souls of real people.

As I grew older I got to know more and more about the great painters of the world in Europe, the United States, China and Japan—about Matisse and Renoir, Picasso and Paul Klee. But my adoration of Rembrandt continues to this day. Why? Because I see in him a tremendous feeling of humanity for humanity. His spirit is so intense; he shows you not just the face but the pain which racks the soul within. Take his painting ‘The Nightwatch’, which commands the rapt gaze of thousands of visitors at the Rijks Museum, Amsterdam. The first time I stood before it, I cried my heart out. It is the only painting in the world which has that effect on me every time I see it. The subject—what is it? Something as commonplace as the city fathers. Nothing sentimental or sad. It doesn’t show anything like death or the crucifixion. But when you stand before it, you are in a state of ecstasy, a spiritual bliss that may never come to you in temple or mosque.

That is the power of painting.

And the way in which the artist has tackled the areas of the canvas,—the work on it, the thought in it—is beyond the human.

In those days I went to the mosque regularly. There was a time when I prayed eight hours a day and learnt passage after passage of the Koran by heart. That was when my stepmother's father decided I should become a *maulvi* (priest). I was seven or eight, too young to protest, too young even to know what it meant. But the training in a Baroda boarding school lasted only a year. During that time I was not allowed to paint. I broke that rule—I painted on the floor, on cups and plates and dishes. A frenzied strength made me defy the elders and break free.

In fact, in class nine I announced that I could not continue in school. I was no good at studies, and school-going interfered with my painting. Father realized he had no choice; he could not force me to attend school. But he must have been extremely worried because there really was no hope of making any kind of living through painting. Not in those days. Certainly not in our limited small-town, middle-class world.

My uncle was a *maulvi*. He did not object to my painting *per se*, he only felt it was an useless activity. ‘Since he won’t study, let him learn a trade. All this dreaming and drawing is no good,’ he said. And because I had skill in drawing it was decided that I could become a good tailor. I could draw and cut out cloth to be stitched!

Would you believe it, father actually took me to a tailor and left me in his shop. Now the tailor had his own views on training apprentices. He gave me needle and thread and asked me to sew. But where was the cloth? ‘No need,’ said the tailor. ‘Just imagine you have the cloth in your hand, and make the motions of pushing the needle in and pulling it out. And mind, I want neat, even stitches. Don’t get the thread tangled either.’ He wanted me to do the pushing and the pulling for a week from morning to evening so that, when I was given a garment, I would have become an expert in smooth sewing. With that, the tailor turned his attention to cutting a lovely piece of foreign cloth for a suit. During the British days, suits were the habitual formal wear and this tailor was fussy about standards. He had a reputation to maintain, you see.

The tailor was a big hulking man with fierce moustaches which bristled at the slightest signs of slacking. Do you blame me for quitting his shop after three- days? Luckily, father turned out to be sympathetic.

You might wonder how, in a family like mine and in a small town like Indore, I got to learn about the painters of the world. There was the town library which had a decent collection of books on the subject, with lots of illustrations. I got to know the Impressionists and the Abstract Expressionists. I learnt about cubism and surrealism. A college-going friend took me to the college library. That is where I came across my first history of art, written by John Ruskin. It was not heavy reading at all. I turned each page with eagerness and anticipation.

After reading Ruskin and books on the modern art movement in the West, I became conscious of being part of a whole stream, a stream with goal and direction. My work had never been abstract, nor had it been realistic. I was drawing faces and portraits of real people, but they were not detailed and finished likenesses. My strokes were bold. I sought to capture the essence rather than the externals of anything I painted, whether face or scene. I never liked naturalistic painting. It seemed too much like copying to me.

But I was aware of commonplace romance and realism in portraiture. Ramachandra, Maharaja Yeshwantrao Holkar's special photographer, had a dozen paintings of Ravi Varma. I was a child of ten when I saw them. Nowadays people say Ravi Varma is a pioneer, that he has a place in the history of Indian art. I don't agree. He was a calendar artist pure and simple.

I was twelve when I heard the romantic story of a French painter who was commissioned to paint the portrait of the Maharaja. The artist made one condition. 'I have to live with the Maharaja in the palace and observe him for two years before I make a single stroke with the brush.'

'Done,' said the king. That is how a Frenchman got to experience the unimagined splendours of the lifestyle of Indian royalty for two whole years. The portrait he did was displayed at the town hall. As I gazed at it I too dreamed of painting the Maharaja one day..and of palace luxuries...

The glimpses we common folk had of kingly ways were quite dazzling. On Dussehra the king rode on his state elephant round the town streets. I don't know what was more gorgeous—the king or the elephant. Their silks and jewels made them both shine golden in the sun. There was a *mela* on the *maidan*, at which I distinctly remember painted clay dolls being sold. We bought those dolls each year, and I gradually acquired a fine collection.

Muharram was a very important day in Indore. It was not seen as a Muslim event. Hindus were equally enthusiastic participants. The Maharaja himself joined the procession every year.

To Muslims, Muharram is not a festival of rejoicing. It is an occasion for mourning the martyrdom of the Prophets grandson Hazrat Husain, who was killed in battle. On the tenth day, Muslims would take out *taziyas* (mobile tombs crafted with bamboo, coloured gilt paper and cloth) in a procession as is customary, and immerse them in the river. The Maharaja's *taziya* was the grandest of all—a colossal affair, two storeys high!

The making of these *taziyas* was a specialized art. In fact the huge ones took a whole year to make. As soon as they were immersed in water, the craftsmen began to make new *taziyas* for the following year. I used to go and watch them being made. It was a family trade for artisans who had come from north Asia to settle in Indore.

Today there is no time either to make such *taziyas*, or to go and watch them being crafted with that delicate sureness of touch.

During Muharram they also made huge papier mache horses and painted them. They represented the steed named Dul dul on which Husain rode to the wars and was martyred. You know that I am known as the painter of horses. All my life I have drawn horses. My fascination for those glorious creatures began with childhood memories of horses in the festival procession. They too were taken to the river, sprinkled with water and brought back to be stabled for the next year's show.

There were no communal riots in Indore. I heard about them for the first time only when I came to Bombay. Our *gully* had Muslims and Hindus living cheek by jowl. We visited each other and invited each other to celebrate Id and Diwali. There were exchanges of greetings and sweets.

My childhood years were a significant era for India in its struggle for freedom from the British Raj. There were many Englishmen living in the princely state of Indore. I hated them—their raw complexion, insolent gait and haughty ways. Later I was to staunchly support the Satyagraha movement, though I was never an active participant in politics at any time.

In Indore the British Resident was known to be spying on the Maharaja. Fawning Indians got rich very quickly, before our eyes. They were rewarded with titles and honours. Their sons came to school in posh cars, dressed like princes, and threw their weight around. I think I began to hate snobbery and social disparity because of those experiences. I saw—the white men driving past in stately carriages and cars. People cringed before them and bowed to them. Some even fell flat on their faces.

When I painted the scene of Maharaja Yeshwantrao Holkar welcoming the Viceroy at the railway station, it was from a real image etched on my mind as a child. His son objected to the picture of the Maharaja humbling himself before the white man. But that was exactly what he had done. The princes of India, by and large, did demean themselves for favours and friendship from the British and passively allowed the British to establish control over the Indian states.

An illustrated weekly called the *Riyasat* published in Delhi, described the nawabs, rajas and their doings. It was my first exposure to such things. I began also to follow the stirring events of the Independence movement.

Our home in Indore was a typical joint family establishment. There were our parents and grandfather, and grandfather's brother and his family, all living in the same small house. Drawing room? We had no such thing. You straightaway entered the bedroom where we spread our carpets and slept in a row at night. When these were rolled up and put aside, it became a living room. Father alone had his *palang* (a bedstead with curtains).

We had to make do with a single bathroom at the back. There was a kitchen too where simple meals were prepared by my stepmother. It was *rotis* mostly, and a *salan* (curry) with a little meat and lots of gravy. On Sundays, father would go to the market, choose the meat and spices carefully. He himself would cook gourmet *biryani*s for us and invite others to join the feast. Now you know why, though father had a good, stable-income, he had to do with a bicycle for transport. He could never get rich.

My interest in girls began very early. I was only ten when I began to carry a small mirror in my pocket. This was for the express purpose of looking at a girl in the neighbourhood. Whenever she passed by, I would hold the mirror in the palm of my hand, angled to catch her face in a close-up without her suspecting it. I continued getting infatuated with one girl after another.

This was perhaps because I had no mother. I knew father loved me. But he was an authority to be feared and obeyed. I rebelled sometimes. But our training was to submit to our elders, to say 'yes', and to be very quiet around the house.

I thus found myself drawn towards women. This has continued all my life. I see woman as the image of *shakti*. Women have the real power. Even Islam assigns an important place to woman. Wasn't the Prophets daughter Fatima the first to reach heaven after him?

A child needs security and unquestioning love. I got both from my grandfather. I knew that whatever happened, he would always be on my side. I would tell everyone very proudly '*Mein dada se paida hua.*' ('I was born of my grandfather'). I slept next to him at night and he kept a constant eye on me during the day He brought lunch to school everyday. We sat under a tree and ate it together. At home no one dared to point a finger at me because he was such a staunch champion of my cause.

Once my uncle got very angry with me because I had scribbled on his books. He began to thrash me. My yells brought grandfather to the scene. 'Stop it at once,' he thundered to my uncle. 'Don't you dare touch him. My grandson has every right to do whatever he likes in this house.'

Grandfather spoilt me shamelessly. I would pick at my food and say, 'I can't eat this. I don't like this curry.' Instead of admonishing me he would take me to the bazaar and buy me the food I liked. He bought me many toys, even imported cars and trains. How many times have I run to him, put my little hand over his finger, and walked down the street, both of us perfectly happy in each other's company!

Grandfather had a long white beard. He wore a black cap and a long *achkan*. He no more Urdu than my father did, but he had an air of command and a native shrewdness which everyone respected.

I remember the day he died. I was playing outside—ignorant, as only a child can be, of the impending calamity. They would have left me out of it, but grandfather wanted to see me before he died. Everyone went out leaving us alone together. I saw his pain-lined face. A single tear dropped from the corner of his eye. That was all. He could not speak, With a trembling hand he took out a ten rupee note from under his pillow and put it in my hand. He grew still. Soon the others came in and took me out of the room. I did not know he died with me by his side. He was seventy years old.

It took me some time to realize just what grandfather's death meant. Everything seemed to be finished for me. Dazed and grief-stricken I avoided everyone at home. I couldn't bear to stay indoors. I spent the days wandering aimlessly or playing with the neighbourhood children in the lane.

And so the years passed until I was seventeen years old. That is when I went to Bombay, thinking that in the big city I could make a living as a painter. I had won a gold medal in an Indore exhibition. It gave me hope. Almost as soon as I landed in Bombay, I sold a landscape. Someone saw me painting on the street. He liked it and bought it on the spot. For ten rupees! It was not a small sum. A household could be run on 20 rupees in those days. I began to go from door to door offering to do portraits. People did take a chance with me and paid me as much as fifteen to twenty rupees for a portrait.

I could not continue in this easy way because people did not want me to paint them as I wanted to paint them. 'No, no, no!' they would say. 'Paint me fair and lovely. I want a glowing skin and a Greek nose!'

So I decided to do cinema hoardings. Of course it was not fine art. It was painting likenesses again. But I had always been enchanted by the 'Talkies'. This was as close as I could get to realizing my ambition of becoming a film director!

For months I worked at cinema hoardings, mixed paint, applied the background and filled in the faces. My work was mostly in the red-light area near Grant Road. I had no

home. But at seventeen I could sleep on the sidewalks. I was paid 6 annas per day. I got rice for 6 paise. The curry or the dal came free.

Once when I had no other work, I got free meals in the *dhaba* that I used to frequent in those days. It was called ‘Play House’ and was at the Grant Road junction, very close to the theatres. The *dhaba* owner’s old mother refused to be photographed. I sat in a corner of the eatery and painted her without her knowledge. I got lunch and dinner for it. I did not have the 2 paise for the morning cup of tea.

I got married in 1941 and had to get a job that would pay. I began to design nursery furniture and toys for Parsis and other Westernized Indians. I introduced designs from Indian folklore to people who knew only ‘Little Bo-peep’ and ‘Baa baa black sheep’. Soon I had seven or eight men working under me. But this was not what I wanted to do with my life.

The year India got her independence; my struggles too bore some fruit. I held my first exhibition of painting. I was thirty-two years old.

In all those years in Bombay I had never met or fraternized with other artists. I had seen Raza and Souza. Amrita Shergil was there for her exhibition, but she looked like an inaccessible princess. I used to stand before the works of other artists for hours on end.

It was at my 1947 exhibition that the Progressive Artists of Bombay became aware of me for the first time. ‘Husain? Who’s he?’ said they, and invited me to join their group.

That was the beginning of contemporary art in India. At that time Indian artists thought they had to paint either in the Royal Academy style of the West or join the Bengal Revivalists in a self-conscious Indianness. We wanted to develop a live, original and authentic language of modern art. We collaborated with likeminded Progressives in Delhi and Calcutta to fight our opponents. And yes, it took us ten years, but we demolished the old rotting system and cleared the air.

We were blackballed by the schools of art. The professors warned their students to have nothing to do with the Progressives. Some blamed us for destroying great Indian traditions with our ‘Western’ notions.

True, we were influenced by the art movements in the West. But our inspiration came from India. Our work was truly Indian in form, nature and spirit. Scholars like Ananda Coomaraswamy helped us a lot with their writings on Indian art. We refused to be realistic, ornamental or imitative.

What a fight we put up together! But that togetherness is quite gone. We bicker with each other now. Success has divided us.

I was going to talk only about my childhood. But I *had* to tell you about my long years of struggles in Bombay.

My childhood dreams and passions urged me to continue despite setbacks. It took me thirty years to mount my first exhibition in the city. In all those years, never once did I yield to despair. I kept on painting though I had no chance of showing my work to others. The thought of giving up never crossed my mind.

I am eighty years old now. I have seen thought and felt much through many experiences, sweet and sour. I have tried my hand at several things. Some came out better than I expected, others failed.

I have no regrets. I can watch a procession down on Cuffe Parade from the posh block where I live now, with the same tingling sensations which delighted me so long ago, as when watching the beautiful taziyas swaying on the shoulders of the Muharram mourners as they went down the road to the river.

## KELUCHARAN MAHAPATRA

When I saw Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra on the stage for the first time, I was disappointed. To my callow mind he seemed a wizened old man. Two beady eyes gleamed under a bald head, a smile creased his face as he greeted the audience. His dress was simple—a brown dhoti with a black border.

‘Why, he looks like a pixie!’ I thought. ‘How can he be a great dancer? He has neither the face nor the figure for it. No charisma.’

But when he began to dance, all feelings fled except for wonder—wonder at the magic he made so effortlessly. His *pallavi* (a number of pure dance) was radiant. But there were no words at all to describe his *abhinaya* (depiction through expressions of the face and body).

I was used to young men and women handling the Radha—Krishna theme. But Kelubabu’s Radha was altogether different. Shy and tremulous, she shone with a beauty from within and without. How deep her sighs as she waited for Krishna under the fragrant trees! How angry the lift of her eyebrows when she saw him flirt with other women!

And Krishna ... shimmering in every limb, every song, and every movement!

With other dancers *sringara* (theme of love) was good acting. With Kelubabu, you could not believe he was conscious of what he was doing. When I grew older I realized that such spontaneity comes not from instinct alone, but from profound reflection—and the commitment of a lifetime.

‘My dancing and teaching are based on deep thinking,’ says Kelubabu. ‘Not only thinking about what I learnt from my gurus, but also by linking it to painting, sculpture, music and poetry. My work always falls short of what I see in my mind. But I am very conscious of the need to pass on to others what I see and what I know.’

Today the term ‘Odissi nritya’ evokes visions of a classical dance form performed in prestigious venues across the world. Artists, connoisseurs and critics have acclaimed its elegance and precision, and its capacity to explore emotions both deeply and delicately.

But as recently as fifty to sixty years ago, Odissi dance was shunned even in Orissa, where the art had grown around temples, especially at the Jagannath Mandir in Puri. An Oriya saying denounced music as the pursuit of the shameless. Dance was worse—it was practised by the decadent. The ancient dance form called Odhra-Magadha in the *Natyasastra* (*circa* first century AD), and painted in the Rani Gumpha caves (second century BC), was stigmatized as lewd and lowly.

True, the fire had died. But the embers glowed in two living forms—the dance of the *Maharis* and the *Gotipuas*. The *Maharis* were women dancers attached to the temples. Their dance was part of ritual worship—both before the sanctum and in the festival

procession of the gods round the streets. The Gotipuas were young boys who dressed as girls to enact through dance the stories of Krishna. They represented *the gopis* of Vrindavan.

Both the Mahari and the Gotipua traditions had their roots in the centuries-old Bhakti cult. The great poets and songsters of Orissa—the birthplace of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Jayadeva—were key figures in this pan-Indian movement of self-surrendering devotion.

Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra inherited this multifaceted tradition. Trained in childhood in the Gotipua and *Raas* styles, he became the single most important contributor to the renaissance of Odissi nritya. In the process he became the foremost artist and guru in that genre.

Kelubabu is known both as traditionalist and innovator. His researches into art forms related to dance have enriched the repertoire of Odissi in music and poetry. His intuitive response to temple sculpture and to the *pata chitra* art have added new dimensions to his choreography.

Above all, Kelubabu has been an inspiring and demanding guru to a large number of disciples from all over India and many parts of the world.

Today Odissi has performing artists of quality. But there is no other guru of Kelucharan Mahapatra's stature to perpetuate the tradition.

If you ask him about this Kelubabu will say, 'Don't imagine that a great art form depends on a few individuals here and there. As long as the gods in our temples stand, our arts will draw their life force from them. As for Odissi, it has survived greater periods of decline. I don't think we need to worry about its future. If a single guru appears in a hundred years, it means all the masters are alive in him.'

Who can question the faith of a master?

### FROM THE EARTH TO THE STARS

My earliest memories are of a merry and carefree childhood among the trees and the green fields of my little village. This was Raghurajpur near the temple-town of Puri in Orissa. Yes, the same Puri, famous throughout India as the home of Lord Jagannath. Thousands of pilgrims gather there during the annual festival to see Lord Jagannath, flanked by his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra. They go round the streets on a splendid chariot. Like most people in Orissa, my family too worshipped Lord Jagannath with a whole-hearted devotion.

My mother was a simple and pious woman. She had lost a child before me. Therefore, when I was born, she took me straight to the village temple and placed me at the feet of the Goddess there, saying, 'Devi, this boy is not mine. He is yours. As his mother, it is your duty to protect him.' Perhaps it was this simple prayer which saw me through several bouts of illness in my childhood. And though I was sickly, it kept me cheerful.

I remember my father vividly. As a child I was fascinated by the things he did. By profession he was a *pata chitrakar*, which means a painter. He drew pictures of gods and goddesses, especially the stones of Krishna, and sold them to make a living.

Sometimes, when I came back from playing games, I would sit next to my father and watch him draw outlines of figures. A few strokes of colour and they would leap to life before my eyes. Another thing he did excited me even more. He could play the drum. This was the nadya-khol or mridang. He used to play it at die temple *sankirtan*. Sankirtan is the group-singing of devotional songs. Sometimes, as he sat and painted quietly, I would remember the thrill of the drums. He had a small box for paint brushes. That box had resonant sides. Slowly I would start tapping upon it. My father would look up, smile indulgently and say, 'Come on, I'll teach you —Dhirkitataka, dhirkitataka, khimrikita, khimrikita!'

I would play those sounds on my box drum. The room would resound with our enthusiastic-drumming—'dhirkud, dhirkud, dhirkud...'

Orissa is a land full of music and dance. Our village too had its dance troupes, two of them. They performed a traditional dance called Gotipua nritya in which young boys took part. They were dressed up as gopis, or the cowherd girls of Vrindavan. Our village had a famous *jatra* party or folk theatre as well.

I grew up in this world full of song and dance, drums and bells. My heart echoed to the 'tham tadinamta' from the sankirtan, the 'tha-thai-thai' of the gotipua groups and the popular songs of the jatra. Within the house there was of course father's mridang. I was always dancing and imitating the dancers I saw.

My grandmother loved me dearly. She would encourage me by asking me to dance for her. At once I would leap and twist and prance. She would be doing some household work—cleaning rice, stringing flowers, or even praying—and would drop her work and watch my antics with delight. When I stopped to catch my breath she would burst out, 'This boy must certainly become a dancer. He is a born artist!'

Sometimes I would imitate the singing and the acting I saw in the jatra plays at the village. I hardly understood the meaning of what I did, but my imitation was very good, full of my own enjoyment of what I was doing. My father saw my capers and realized that I had a keen sense of rhythm. He would say, 'At this young age he learns quickly. He has no inhibitions. Perhaps I should send him to be trained properly by some great dance teacher in Puri.' But my mother would not agree to send me away so far from her. I was too young and too precious!

Our village had its little school. There the day began with a long recitation of shlokas. When the lessons would start. And to me, they seemed to go on forever. My heart was not in my studies at all. I was always lost in my own world of 'sa-ri-ga-ma-pa' and 'dhim ta dhim'. I would sit in the class and dream of dancing. How could any teacher be pleased with me?

One day I was dancing as usual at home, when Bhalabhadra Sahu, the village dance master, dropped in. He watched my wild gyrations for a few minutes. His eyes grew wide in surprise and his eyebrows rose. He turned to my mother and exclaimed, 'Arey! This is wonderful! Your son seems to have the gift. If you send him to me, you will see what I can do.' My mother said, perhaps only in fun, and not as a serious commitment, 'Han, han! He is crazy. Take him. He is always jumping and spinning like a top.'

These words stuck in my mind. I thought they gave official sanction to do what I desperately wanted to. From the next day I started going very quietly to the dance class in

Bhalabhadra Sahu's house. I sneaked past the village school where the children were reciting their daily lessons. How glad I was to escape that!

On the very first day, as soon as I stepped into his class, Guruji told me, 'Join the dancers and learn the step properly. Those words electrified me. I forgot myself. I became totally one with the dance. And yet, all through that time, and even in my moments of greatest joy, I was quite aware that if my father caught sight of me among the Gotipua trainees, he would forbid me to continue. So I did not tell anyone that I had made the switch from village school to dance class, and people at home thought I was still reciting lessons at school.'

Everyday, promptly at 10 o'clock in the morning, my lather would stand on the doorstep and bellow, 'Keloool' That call would reach me anywhere in the village. It was the signal for the morning meal. I would drop whatever I was doing and come running home. Father arid I would sit on the floor. Mother would serve us food. We would eat together and I would return to the dance class. My father never once ate without me by his side. Such a seemingly little thing to keep in mind. Now I know it was a sign of his deep affection for me.

At thirteen, I had received three years of secret training. My guru decided that the Durga puja festival would be the right time to launch me on the stage. Now this created a very big problem. I had to dress like a gopi. I had to wear a girl's costume and ornaments and pierce my nose and ears to put rings on them!

My mother could deny me nothing. Moreover, she had nothing against Gotipua nritya. She only saw the devotion in it, not the vulgarity. As usual, she came to my rescue. She found a clever excuse for my need. 'I have lost several children,' she told my father, 'surely due to some evil influence. I am afraid some harm will come to our darling Kelu too. So I have taken a vow to pierce my son's nose and ears before the goddess in the temple.'

My father was horrified by this strange vow. But he could not object. He did go on postponing the day of the ceremony, until, one day, when he was away in Puri to sell his paintings, my mother got the job done.

On his return, as if the sight of his child with pierced nose and ears was not enough, Guru Bhalabhadra Sahu came home to break the 'news' to him. Of course, Guruji thought my father would be delighted. 'Chintamani,' he said, 'Your son is now fully trained as a Gotipua. With your blessing, he is going to make his debut on the stage on Durga puja day.'

'Nonsense! What are you saying?' Father was shocked.

Guruji went on happily. 'It's not nonsense! I'm saying that your son Kelu—'

Father cut in rudely, 'How did he learn to dance?'

'He has been learning for three years now. He is one of my best pupils;

Mother joined in: 'What is wrong with that?' Poor woman she tried to calm him down but father turned to her in red-hot fury, 'So you knew about it? How dare you allow Kelu to do this? What do these people know about dancing that you sent Kelu to learn from them?'

My guruji's face looked black. Father continued to shout things which were hurtful and bitter.

'You call these vulgar movements dancing?' he roared. 'I shan't let my son wink at the audience, twitch his lips and wiggle his bottom on the stage. I will never allow him to do this Gotipua dance. I know you have taken great pains train to him. But if he dances at all, I want it to be good and pure and noble. Never this!'

I was terrified by that explosion. But I learnt later that what father said was true. Well, I never went back to the village dance class again.

But something good did come out of that scene. Father realized I had set my heart on dancing. He decided to send me to the right guru.

This was Mohanchandra Devgoswami who was a learned and respected teacher of Raas nritya in Puri.

Raas nritya is a group dance with some bits of drama in-between. It describes, with a lot of feeling for the characters, Krishna's life from his birth to the killing of Kamsa. Krishna's pranks in Vrindavan are depicted in detail. In other words, you can say that Raas nritya is another way of worshipping Krishna—not with flowers and lights, but with song and dance and acting.

Soon I learnt all the roles that were to be played on the stage. It was the story which linked the dance and made it come alive. I was completely lost in it, lost in the glory of Krishna. Living with Krishna all the time—in rehearsals, performances and dreams—I began to believe that all the stories we acted out were true. I could no longer separate the story from my life.

But Raas nritya is like that. It can arouse so much emotion as to get the spectators into a frenzy. They would come and fall at the feet of the actors who played Radha and Krishna!

Overwhelmed by all these experiences, one day, some of the young boys in the troupe went to the railway station to catch a train to Vrindavan. I was only thirteen. I thought that at the end of the journey, I would meet Radha and Krishna, if not earlier on the railway platform, at least under some shady tree near the river Yamuna! I would join the real gopis in their dance around Krishna!

Our guru got to hear of our escapade. He was frantic. He sent people to find us and bring us back. His relief in getting us back made him shout at us all the more. 'Idiots! Fools! Are you mad?

You ran off to see Krishna? You can do it right here in Puri, Lord Jagannath is our Krishna! Oh, you stupid boys! Will the Lord whom even the saints and gods cannot see easily, will He come before you in human form?'

When I heard this it was as if I woke up from a beautiful dream. I found real life miserable in comparison. I became totally depressed. It took me a long time to get over that feeling of being terrible let down, what adults called getting disillusioned. It is a part of growing up for everyone.

But much later, I realized that we can see Krishna. God can take a human form and come down to us through art. All my life, my dancing has been a remembering of my childhood dream. It is my attempt to recreate Krishna's playful actions—Krishnaleela.

Many students came to join us and many went away. But I stayed with Mohanchandra Devgoswami through the years. In those days we were taught to see the guru as father, mother and God. His word was law. The more we served him, the better we could learn; the more he blessed us, the greater our good fortune. I served my guru in every way I could, and was always by his side. I was in charge of managing his household and keeping accounts. I slept near him so that I could be on hand if he called at night. I would make his bed, wash his clothes, run errands, press his feet—do anything he wanted. It was 'Kelu-do-this', 'Kelu-come-here' all the time!

Meanwhile, my father had had a heart attack and died. He left a message for his children. They were sad words from a man who owned up to his failures: 'I die in utter poverty, leaving only my love for my sons. Tell them to be confident, never over-confident. I have been drowned in debts. Tell them they must never borrow money, that our name should never be dishonoured. 'After this my guru taught me with greater love. Whatever I am today is entirely due to his blessings.

Yet I left him.

It started with what you might think was a small mistake. I did something forbidden—nothing bad, just a bit of mischief. But the results were shattering.

In those days cinema was just a word to me. K very body talked about it and I was curious to find out what it meant. That was when *Kangan*, a 'superhit' of those times, was being shown in Puri. I knew that my guru would never let me go to the movie theatre. So, at night, while he was asleep, I tiptoed out of the house to see the second show. I did make sure that a fellow student of mine was there to take care of our teacher, if he should call.

Just after midnight Guruji woke up. 'Kelu, where are you?' he said. My ^friend tried to cover up for me, saying that I had gone downstairs. 'Let me press your feet,' he said. But my guru did not want anybody else. He wanted me.

'Why did Kelu go down? Did I say something to hurt him?' Lighting the lamp, Guruji came down in search of me. The commotion awoke everyone.

I was back by then and standing outside the door, wondering how to slip in unnoticed. That is when I heard someone say that I might have stolen all the money and run away. So my friend was forced to tell the truth. 'Don't say that. Kelu has just gone to see a film.'

Guruji heard that. Perhaps because he felt a sense of relief, he spoke some words which shocked me deeply. The keys dropped from my hands. All at once there was complete silence within the house. Everyone knew I had heard those words of abuse.

From that moment I became convinced that I could not stay under my guru's roof, ever again.

The door opened. Guruji was standing motionless. I picked up the keys, walked up to him slowly, and placed the keys at his feet. Guruji turned his face way. He might have been embarrassed. But I saw it as rejection. That decided my course of action. I went out and sat on the road.

At dawn I sent word to my mother to come. The sun rose high. It got hotter and hotter. I was still sitting there in the afternoon when I heard my guru say, ‘Gall that *badmash*, that bad boy, and feed him.’ But no one dared to approach me.

At last my mother arrived. I told her I was coming home for good. I refused to explain any further and took leave of my guru.

For years my guru had been afflicted with leprosy. For eight years I had nursed him, cleaned his wounds, put medicine on them and prayed for his welfare.

‘There is no one to serve me as you have done,’ my guru said to me. ‘Are you really going to leave me like this, sick and full of suffering?’

My silence made him angry. He cursed me, ‘You heartless fellow, you will also suffer the same fate!’

As I took the dust from his feet in final farewell, I thought about those words. I felt that his curse would come true only if I did something wrong. Otherwise, the dust from my guru’s feet would keep all evil away. It would guard me from misfortune.

I am not going to tell you about my years of suffering after this. They were many and long. I could not get enough work to support myself and my family. Dancing was impossible. I toiled in the fields; I worked in a betel leaf plantation. There I carried pots arid pots of water each day, and cried over my fate.

Later J found work in a theatre company in Puri. By a great stroke of luck, the manager of the drama troupe discovered that I could dance. He started casting me in key roles which demanded singing and dancing.

It was slow and uphill work to establish myself as a dancer and as a teacher of this very great and ancient style of Indian dancing called Odissi. In fact, it has taken a whole lifetime. Which is quite all right. Because dance has not only made my life purposeful, it has been my whole life.

### RASIPURAM KRISHNASWAMI LAXMAN

‘All my life I have painted crows. Singly, in pairs, threesomes, whole murders of them.’ He breaks off to chuckle. ‘Don’t look so horrified. Murder is the collective noun for crows. Even as a child I had been fascinated by them. They are smart, lively and have a ‘strong survival instinct. The common crow is really an uncommon bird.’

The speaker is the uncommon creator of that common man who represents the mute millions of this country—who else but Rasipuram Krishnaswami Laxman, India’s most celebrated cartoonist? Forty years of cartooning have dimmed neither Laxman s brilliance nor the bafflement of his check-coated man who blinks at the political scene from his front -page corner in *The Times of India*.

When I approached him for an interview, Laxman refused point-blank to talk about his profession. ‘You will ask me what every damn fool asks me—”How do you get your ideas everyday?” ‘As though I could explain. And if I did, as though you could understand!’

But he was willing to talk about his passion for crows, with many digressions and sly digs at the sacred cows in the Indian mind.

A year later I found myself in his office cabin listening to descriptions of his childhood. Quick pencil sketches showed me what he was talking about. His words had all the distinguishing features of a Laxman cartoon—the fine eye for detail, the pungent wit, the puckish sparkle, the sudden probe below the surface, and hearty guffaws at the absurdities of life.

What is it that makes R.K. Laxman so special among cartoonists?

Laxman's own answer would be, 'My genius, what else?'

'A little humility is not a bad thing if you are at the top,' writes fellow cartoonist Sudhir Dar (*The Illustrated Weekly of India*) as he recounts this story of the cartoonist Ranan Lurie's meeting with Laxman. When the American asked him who the best Indian cartoonist was, Laxman flashed back, 'I am.' 'The second, third, fourth, fifth best man on the job? Laxman continued to repeat 'I am'.

Colleagues list other faults—naiveté, inaccurate caricature, old-fashioned style, lack of experimentation, repetitiveness, verbosity. Even while admitting that he has no peer in pocket cartoons, they call his political cartooning atrocious. No acid-throwing or lava burst—Laxman is too cosy, pleasant, decent, gentle. 'He doesn't take the debate forward,' says O.V. Vijayan. 'There is no political comment, only political statement,' says cartoonist Ravi Shankar. 'He is not easily provoked. And doesn't want to provoke his readers either,' comments Abu Abraham.

Laxman may not impress an international, particularly the Western, audience. 'Why should he? He draws for us,' says my friend Keshav (a cartoonist for *The Hindu*). 'No other cartoonist has understood the average Indian as Laxman has. This gives him a far wider reach than his sophisticated colleagues. From garbage disposal to nuclear physics, he can make you see every issue clearly and in a new light.'

We leaf through Laxman's cartoon collections, illustrations, even doodles. One of them shows a room in the Space Centre where scientists are busy with the 'Man on the Moon Project'. Pictures of a rocket and a cratered moon loom over them. A long-coated scientist enters, points to the common man standing at the doorway and says he has found the perfect space traveller. The man from India can survive without water, food, light, air, shelter'.

When we stop laughing Keshav asks me, 'Can you call this superficial? A Laxman cartoon has two characteristics. It is drama frozen at a crucial moment with something before and something after it. He puts us on the spot. We feel the whole ambience. The common man is helpless in his country; he chokes with frustrations and fury. Laxman's cartoons convert this rage into humour.'

Laxman's missilic rise began very early. While still at the Maharaja's College, Mysore, studying politics, economics and philosophy, he began to illustrate his elder brother R.K. Narayan's stories in *The Hindu*. He drew political cartoons for the local papers, and for the *Swatantra*, edited by doyen Khasa Subba Rao. He held a summer job at the Gemini Studios, Madras.

After graduation Laxman went to Delhi to find a job as cartoonist. *The Hindustan Times* told him he was too young, that he should start with provincial papers. The *Free Press Journal* in Bombay had no such qualms. Laxman found himself seated next to another cartoonist who was furiously drawing a bird in a cage. His name was Bal Thackeray. ('Is that an Indian name?' wondered Laxman who knew only of William Makepeace Thackeray.)

One day the *Journal* proprietor banned him from making fun of communists. So the twenty-three-year old Laxman left, caught a Victoria, and walked into *The Times of India* office. From that day 'I had a table and a room to myself which I have used ever since.' And used with a freedom unknown to any Indian journalist for as long.

Laxman feels oppressed by having to turn out a cartoon everyday. 'Each morning I grumble, I plan to resign as I drag myself to the office. By the time I come home I like my work.'

Laxman plays with every shade of humour—wit, satire, irony, slapstick, buffoonery, tragicomedy. Such versatility dazzles as does his unwearied discipline. Through the long, prolific years the man] from Mysore has never hit anyone below the belt. And that makes him India's most beloved cartoonist.

### THROUGH A COLOURED GLASS

In our old house in Mysore, there was a window. It had a glass pane divided into many parts. Each part had a different colour. One day, the pane broke. Bits of coloured glass tinkled down.

I ran to pick up those pieces. I looked at every colour, one after another. Suddenly, I happened to see through the glass. And I saw a new world! It was strange... weird... frightening. Everybody and everything looked blue. The blue gardener dug the blue earth. Nearby stood a blue cow swishing its blue tail. Why, the sun had turned blue in the sickly sky. Everything was spooky and still. I couldn't bear it anymore.

Quickly, I raised the green glass piece. Thank God, things became cheerful again. The same gardener was shovelling away with a bucket by this side. The cow turned friendly.

But I had to try out the red piece. It struck terror into my heart. The cow was ready to attack me, the dog bared its teeth, the gardener was digging up a skeleton under the neem tree! Red clouds gathered in a bloody sky. The world was a scene of war. Sweating and trembling, I switched back to green. At once things calmed down. It was a cool, pleasant day out in the garden at home where the breeze blew softly. Father and mother were out. I was free to play the whole evening.

As I remember it, this was my first communication with my surroundings. I loved looking through the broken glass pieces, feeling different with each colour. Perhaps this was an early sign of my interest in visual things—in drawing and painting that were to be my life.

If you ask, how did a three-year old boy get to handle pieces of broken glass, the answer is: ours was a big family. I was the youngest of five brothers and two sisters. My sisters were married; my brothers went to school and college. Father was the headmaster of the local school. Mother was busy somewhere deep inside the sprawling house. There

was no one to question me then {and no one dares to question me now!) My constant companions were the old gardener and Rover, my dog. They didn't mind what I did, so long as I didn't bother them.

What's that? You want to know what the dog ^looked like? He had ears hanging down and tongue hanging out. Rover was a dull and stupid Great/Dane. But we had good fun together.

The gardener was an old man. He had gnarled, knotty hands, just like the roots of a tree. He looked rather like a tree himself, tall and wooden. His skin was an even brown—it had no colour variations at all. He was my friend. Oh what stories he would tell me! All about his own brave deeds and strange experiences. One of them was about his childhood. It was my favourite.

When the gardener was a little child he used to go into the forest to cut wood. Once, as he trudged home with a bundle of sticks on his head, the evening shadows lengthened. The night sounds of the jungle began. They hurried his footsteps. As he passed by the river he saw a banyan tree dropping its branches over the grey waters. What was that crouching on the branch? Why, it was a white sheet. No...no, it was a ghost! His eyes forgot to blink. The ghost jumped—jumped right into the river, and came up noiselessly. It came dripping out into the river bank, a ghost no more! It had taken the form of a human being. The gardener screamed and ran for his life. He reached the village gasping for breath. He had himself become as white as that ghost on the tree.

At this exciting moment my gardener friend would stop clearing the ground, lean upon his rake and look this way and that to make sure no one was within earshot. He would drop his voice to a hoarse whisper. ‘Oh yes, little master, that river is still there, so is the banyan tree. And so is the ghost, ready to jump into the water, change himself to a man, and mislead travellers at night. Why? What do you mean why? The ghost drinks human blood, that’s why!

With stories like these, are you surprised I developed a terrible fear of the dark? I shivered when I saw twilight shadows. Present-day psychologists would say that it is very wrong to frighten children. But I disagree. I think it is a wonderful experience to be frightened out of one’s wits. If you bring up a child without ghost stories, he will grow up to be frightened of something else. I believe that horror is necessary for normal growth.

Later, when I was twelve or so, I decided to overcome these fears. Late at night, I used to go to the cremation ground near our house, and watch the flames still leaping over the corpse. At last the embers would glow red. It made a striking sight in the black silence.

The gardener’s other stories were equally scary, even when they were about real creatures. Sitting on a stone or a patch of grass, I would watch the gardener draw water from the big well, or hew the logs for the brick stove in the backyard. This stove was used for boiling cauldrons of water for the family to bathe in. Mysore mornings could be quite chilly. The gardener would stop working, wipe the sweat from his face and say, ‘Once, when I was doing just this, a slight rustle made me turn. And I saw a snake right behind me. What do you think; it was a cobra, all of twenty feet long. Its hood was up and swaying. Its tongue flashed in and out, ready to strike. I picked up a stone from the ground and threw it. The snake made a swipe at me, but I sidestepped. This time, I

grabbed the stick I had left by the well, and hit it hard. I kept hitting until it twisted itself into a knot and died on the spot.'

The creatures changed from story to story, but the main action of hitting and killing remained the same. The victims were always poisonous, dangerous or ferocious. The gardener was always strong, brave and clever.

And looking at him, tall and brawny, brown muscles rippling in the sun, I could believe every one of those stories. The old gardener was a hero in my eyes.

And so I lazed in the garden, a huge one full of trees, bushes and hiding places for a growing child, far from the sight (and the calls) of grown-ups inside the house. I would watch the squirrels and insects scurrying by, and birds of every description.

When did I start drawing? May be at the age of three. I started on the wall, of course, like any normal child. Parents were more tolerant in those days. No one stopped my scribbling on the wall. I drew with bits of burnt wood that I got from the hot water stove in the backyard. What did I draw? Oh, the usual things—trees, houses, the sun behind the hill...

I was not at all a good student in the classroom. The one time I got a pat on the back from the teacher was for one of my drawings. We were all asked to draw a leaf. Each child scratched his head and wondered what a leaf looked like. One drew a banana leaf which became too big for the slate. Another drew a speck that couldn't be seen—a tamarind leaf! Some just managed blobs. When the teacher came to me he asked, 'Did you draw this by yourself?' I hesitated. Had I done wrong? Will my ear be twisted? My cheek slapped? I nodded dumbly. And do you know, the teacher actually broke into a smile! He said I had done a very good job. He saw great possibilities in that leaf I drew so long ago on a hot afternoon, sitting in the dull classroom. I had seen that leaf on the peepal tree which I passed each day on my way to school.

Generally, people take everything for granted. They hardly see anything around them. But I had a keen eye. I observed everything and had a gift for recalling details. This is essential for every cartoonist and illustrator.

As far back as I can remember, the crow attracted me because it was so alive on the landscape. In our garden it stood out black against the green trees, blue sky, red earth and the yellow compound wall. Other birds are timid. They try to hide and camouflage themselves. But the crow is very clever. It can look after itself very well.

At age three I began to sketch crows. I tried to draw their antics. My mother saw this and encouraged me. She told me that Lord Shanisvara used the crow for his mount. He was a very powerful god, she added; 'If you draw His crow, surely He will send you good luck.'

I have never grown out of this childhood fascination for the crow. I have painted hundreds of crows, singly and in groups, from near and far, and in many moods. Sometimes I put crows into my cartoons. My crow paintings have gone to many countries—one of them hangs in faraway Iceland now!

There were many trees in our garden. Mango, wood apple, margosa, drumstick... Every single tree spelt adventure. I would scramble right to their tops and watch the world from the heights. How different the same old places looked from the tree top! But

climbing them was not without its terrors. Imagine a small child suddenly coming upon a chameleon on the branch, motionless and menacing! It is really a pre-historic animal, you know. So are the lizards—*onaan*, as we call them—just a twitching tail to show they are alive. When I think back, I realize that to a child, reality seems much more fabulous than fantasy. From a ladybird to a mouse, anything that moves can startle him.

Our garage was a jungle of junk, cobwebs and scorpions which were big or very small, but all quite deadly. Scorpion hunting was a favourite sport for us children. We would move an old tin or kick the rubble. Sure enough, a scorpion would scuttle out. We would beat it to pulp with a stick or stone. My brothers had another pastime. They would catch grasshoppers. The idea was to train them to do tricks, and amaze the world with a grasshopper circus of their own. But the creatures died after a day in their cardboard boxes, though the boxes were lined with grass and filled with tasty titbits from our kitchen.

Perhaps you think we had cruel games. But all children are like that. You see them killing butterflies, throwing stones at dogs, teasing kittens. Only when we grow older do we learn to be kind and realize that selfishness is bad. But even then not all of us learn these things. Otherwise why would there be fights and wars?

But let me get back to the garden again. It was a never-ending source of stories that I made up for myself. For example, have you ever watched an ant hill? Seen the ants going about busily? There are usually two orderly files—one going out, the other coming in. My elder brother, the one just before me, was very inventive. He used to tell me that these ants lived in an enormous township inside the hill. This town had broad streets and big houses, post offices and police stations, playgrounds and movie theatres. Why, the ants even had their own cinema posters. He never tired of spinning fantastic stories about the secret life of the ants!

My two sisters were married and gone. They only came on occasional visits. My brothers lived with us, three of them, almost grown up. But they could all be counted upon to make my life interesting. What a fine time we had together! When the rain clouds loomed in the sky, all of us would run out and watch the way they made shapes and spread themselves into a dark blanket above. My brothers let me join their games sometimes—from cricket to kite-flying. All of them read aloud to me from English books and explained the difficult parts.

Father used to get many magazines for his school. They arrived in big bundles every week, from Madras, London and New York—*Harpers*, *Boys Own Paper*, *Punch*, *Atlantic*, *American Mercury*, *The Merry Magazine*, *The Times Literary Supplement*... brothers read the before they were taken away from our house.

The *Strand Magazine* published Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories about the famous detective Sherlock Holmes. I remember sitting on my brother's lap as he read those stories out to the three younger ones, translating them for me into Tamil. Mother had gone to the Ladies' Club, leaving us in his charge. This must have been the safest way of keeping us under his watchful eye!

My mother was a remarkable woman. Her's was a hectic life. We had a retinue of servants, including a cook, but she had her hands full managing the household. She did some cooking at times. It was of the experimental kind. She would bake shortcakes and

butter biscuits for us. Once she followed a magazine recipe and made toothpowder! At another time she made a new kind of fuel for the boiler, a copper vessel with a water heating system attached to it. Come summer and she would start rolling out *papads* at home—flat round pieces like *chapattis* which were dried on the terrace. We children would hop around and try to help her. She never said it was a bother but let us do what we liked.

Mother had several hobbies. One of them was to buy litho prints of gods and human beings. She would dress them up with bits of cloth, mirrors, beads and sequins. How hideous they looked! But in those days they were in fashion. One of her pictures was called ‘Vanity’. It had a woman decked out in gold-lace saree and gaudy jewellery.

Mother was good at both tennis and badminton. She also played golf. She was the unbeaten local chess champion. She played a good game of bridge as well. At home we loved it when she joined us for carrom or card games. She brought so much life and laughter with her.

I was very proud of my mother. Whatever I know I learnt from her. What a voracious reader she was! She had never stepped into school or college, but there was nothing she did not know about Sanskrit and Tamil literature. She kept up with English writing through translations. We boys would read to her and tell her everything we found in books and magazines.

How many myths and legends she knew! I must say that the best versions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata I know are from her story-telling.

At night she would come up to lie down on her bed upstairs. Then all of us would gather around her. We would chat, crack jokes, tell stories, tell her about our friends, ask for advice... Just thinking about those times makes me happy. How lucky we were to have such a wonderful mother!

Father....There is just one word to describe him—‘formidable’. Are you frightened by that word? Well, it means just that—‘frightening’. As a school teacher and headmaster he was very stern about discipline. I was rather scared of him. But as you know, you need not hate the person you dread. Just look at him, isn’t he like a marble statue with his beak of a nose and a bald head like Julius Caeser? Can any child get close to someone like that?

This is what my elder brother and novelist R.K. Narayan wrote about father in his autobiography, *My Days*: ‘He has the personality of a commander-in-chief rather than a headmaster,’ people used to remark, a stentorian voice, a sharp nose and a lion-like posture—a man who didn’t fuss about children openly, and never sat around and chatted with the members of the family as was the habit of others. He moved in fixed orbits at home. He had a well worn route from his room to the dining or bath room, set hours during which he could be seen at different points, and if one kept out of his way, as I thought then, one was safe for the rest of the day.

He left for school on a bicycle, impeccably dressed in tweed suit and tie, crowned with snow-white turban, at about 9.30 every morning, and he returned home at nine at night, having spent his time at the officers’ club on the way, playing tennis and meeting his friends, who were mostly local government officials. At night a servant would go out with a lantern in order to light my father’s path back home, and to carry his tennis

racquet, leaving him to walk back swinging his cane, to keep off growling street dogs all along the path, which lay sunk in the dust. I must admit I did not know my brother

Narayan was a writer until I saw that he had won a prize from *The Merry Magazine* for a short story.

This was called 'Dodu, the Moneymaker'. It was about a little boy struggling to find money for his urgent needs—like groundnuts and candy! I was very excited because this sounded suspiciously like me. Moreover, the hero of the story had my name! After that I watched Narayan's activities with respect. He would pound away upon a huge Underwood typewriter. Perhaps all that banging was for his first novel *Swami and Friends*, a story about boys growing up in a small town called Malgudi. All Narayan's stories were to be set in this non-existent town. But little did I think then that I would get to know Malgudi as well as Narayan himself. Because later, I was to illustrate my brother's stories. At that time Narayan was also writing articles for a newspaper in Madras. I had a cycle. My brother used to pay me a commission to pedal furiously to the post office and mail his copy on time.

I was about nine or ten when I decided to be an artist. I would cycle for ten miles around our home to find interesting landscapes to paint. Mysore was a good place for this—full of trees, streams, hills and old ruins. I also learnt a lot by looking at illustrations in foreign magazines. The cartoons were a special attraction. I began to draw cartoons and found the local papers willing to publish them! The people I chose to poke fun at were international names—Churchill, Hitler, Mussolini, Nehru and Gandhi! I must have done well because I was asked to draw posters too, for the defence programme and for adult education. I earned my pocket money and never had to trouble my parents for it. 'Dodu' had found the way!

When Narayan's stories began to get published in *The Hindu*, Madras, he asked me to illustrate them. I knew exactly what he wanted, and whom he had in mind for his characters. Didn't we belong to the same place? Hadn't I spent hours in every spot around us, including the busy market square? Hadn't I sketched all those real people he wrote about? Look at this old vegetable seller. She refuses to bring her price down despite the customer's determined haggling.

As I drew hundreds of pictures I picked up the techniques quite naturally. Trial and error taught me to use brush and paint and ink. Others besides Narayan began to ask me to illustrate their stories for them.

When I grew up and became a full-time cartoonist, I had little time to paint or to illustrate stories. But I did draw Thama the baby elephant, little bird Gumchikki who was his best friend, and other woodland creatures. My wife Kamala wrote stories about their adventures in the jungle.

But back in boyhood I found that Narayan could be quite a grim elder brother. He thought it was his duty to make me a better child, teach me good manners and proper behaviour. He would order me to stop biting my nails—or else...! But since he chewed his nails as he said it, the words had little effect. He would scold me for using my shirt front to wipe my hands and face. 'How many times should I tell you that there are towels for just this purpose?' He would forbid me to climb trees or ride the cycle crossbar at breakneck speed. Tell me, can any boy obey such rules?

The worst was when he banned the use of our garden for playing cricket. As the captain of The Rough and Tough and Jolly Cricket Team, I luggered my bats and stumps and led my team mates in a frustrating search for a games field. But though Narayan did not relent, he wrote about my misery in a story called ‘The Regal Cricket Club’. My brother did not think it was strange that he should sympathize so heartily with me in his writing, but not in life!

I must tell you something about Mysore where I grew up. Before India got her independence from the British, Mysore was a princely state. It had a Maharaja ruling over it. He thought that he was a god and his state was the whole world. Most of his subjects thought the same—especially when he put on splendid shows for the people in his royal court, and outdoors during festivals.

The Dussehra festival in Mysore was justly famous. A long and fabulous procession would march past the open-mouthed crowds. There were show horses, trained by Europeans, which danced along daintily to Western tunes. Jewels gleamed on their sleek white bodies. Under petromax lights they looked like fairy creatures. There were richly decorated camels in that procession, looking disdainful about everything! And of course the most splendid sight that we waited for—the elephants! How gorgeous they looked—covered as they were with gold and velvet!

From the palace the Maharaja would go to the Banni Mandap. Banni was a tree he worshipped with ancient rites. The crowds packing the streets would shout ‘Victory to the Emperor! Maharaja ki Jai! The king was dressed in a long coat of gold brocade on which huge emeralds sparkled between diamonds. A jaunty feather rose from his turban. It was fastened with a brooch of rubies.

But WB hove got to keep it here, sir, till the capitol is paid. This was pledged as security?

The Maharaja did look majestic as he swayed along on the silk-lined *howda* on top of the biggest elephant in the procession. Behind him came the royal family, suitably mounted according to rank. There were guests and British visitors. They were seated on chairs arranged on enormous chariots, each as big as a room. These open chariots were drawn by elephants. Then came the Mysore Lancers, rigid and upright on their horses, holding their lances at an angle. Each regiment had its own colours—blue and white, red and blue or green and red. The palace band provided rousing music as an accompaniment to this fantastic spectacle.

I was taken to the court a few times. The Maharaja was a lover of classical music and famous musicians would sing for him. But the way in which these musicians came and went seemed quite funny to me. They were brought to the ground floor in the palace, made to sit on a platform with their instruments. (Everyone had to wear a turban; it was a mark of respect to the king!) When the Maharaja came to court and sat down on his throne, the platform would rise up like a lift through a shaft, to his floor, and reach his presence. The concert would begin and go on for about an hour. When the Maharaja signalled the end, the stage would start moving, back to the ground floor again, with all the musicians still seated on it. As soon as the stage began to descend, the musicians would launch themselves hurriedly into the *Mangalam*—a song which is always sung at the end of a Carnatic music concert. Halfway through, the sounds seemed to come up from a deep well!

But I must say that Mysore had a very elegant way of life. We dressed well, we were expected to be well-mannered. We used to laugh at our Madras cousins who went about without shirts, wearing just a dhoti round their waist.

I cannot end without telling you about my school. I began to attend classes when I was five years old. I hated school. A normal feeling. Tell me, which child likes to go to school? I felt wretched in the classroom. I am convinced that school-learning is unnatural and bad for human beings.

In school we sat on the floor and chorused our lessons. The teachers were terrible. They would write something on the board, ask us to take it down and go out to gossip or to smoke *beedis*. I was very naughty. I got punished and thrashed quite often. But it did not stop me from mischief.

My family insisted that I should attend school, but did not scold me when I failed exams. I barely managed to pass each year. It was the same story when I joined college. I scraped through my BA examinations. What a relief it was to know that I need never go into a classroom again!

After this I tried getting a job as a cartoonist in New Delhi. But *The Hindustan Times* told me I was too young to be a newspaper cartoonist. I was more successful in Bombay. I got work in *The Blitz* and the *Free Press Journal*. Besides cartoons I did comic strips telling the stories of Tantri the Magician and other ‘heroes’. Very soon I made a name for myself and joined a big English newspaper, *The Times of India*. For forty-seven years I have been drawing cartoons for its front page. A stamp was brought out to celebrate the 150th year of this newspaper, and the picture on it was one of my cartoons.

Yes, I have worked very hard and long. But I have not forgotten that you can see the world through pieces of coloured glass. Nor have I lost my love for those noisy black birds which are always around us, managing to survive. I continue to paint crows with as much enjoyment as I did on those long ago days of carefree childhood, when each day was exciting and every hour brought adventure.

## AMJAD ALI KHAN

Tiruvaiyaru village in Tamil Nadu. Crowds of devout listeners pack the thatched *pandal* beside the Cauvery and spill into the street beyond. Carnatic musicians have flocked to pay their homage to the saint-composer Tyagaraja at the annual festival in his name.

Today the dais presents an unusual picture. A debonair, kurta-clad ustad greets us with a strange melody. Why, it is a song of Tyagaraja, framed in the Carnatic raga Sriranjani!

That was the first time a Hindustani musician bridged a cultural divide of sorts with a pilgrimage to offer his tribute to a south Indian master. For Ustad Amjad Ali Khan national integration is not a catchword. It is a practical ideal. ‘Music can do what political treaties and socio-economic agreements cannot do. It can unite people.’ He was a noted participant in the Maharashtra state sponsored programme ‘National Integration through

Music' (1986). After the demolition of the Babri Masjid he brought together Hindu and Muslim artists to present a concert in Ayodhya for communal harmony. The Trust he has founded in his father's name gives awards to Hindustani, Carnatic and Western musicians.

His critics see such acts as calculated self-promotion. They object to his claims of having discovered new ragas—Vibhavari, Lalitadhvani, Kiranranjini, even Subhalakshni (named after his wife)—what are they but old wine in new bottles? Raga Priyadarshini, Jawahar Manjari and Kamalshree—named after Indira Gandhi, Pandit Nehru and Rajiv Gandhi are denounced as media savvy gimmicks.

But no other artist of Amjad Ali Khan's stature has done as much to spread interest in classical music, especially among the young, or worked as much with children. 'Ekta se Shanti' (Peace through Unity) to be played by school children was orchestrated by him. The prayer to be sung by disabled children on World Disabled Day was his composition, Who else has recorded a music album as sweet as 'Amjad's Sarod Sings With Children'?

In fact Amjad Ali Khan is one of those rare practitioners of a traditional art in this country, who react to the currents buffeting our world today. He does not retreat into his art but uses it to draw attention to issues which concern him.

Though the ustad at fifty says he wishes he had been born two centuries ago, into a climate more receptive to his music, he has not stopped trying to create such an ambience in his own time. He knows how to keep any audience glued to their seats—young or old, Indian or foreign, connoisseur or layperson. He is especially good at building a rapport with the young, the future patrons of art. He dares to break into 'We shall overcome' between two 'respectable' ragas at a university festival. What is more, he invites his listeners to sing with his strings!

Does Amjad play to the gallery?

'Oh no. My concerts vary from place to place depending on my own mood and aim. I refuse to be stereotyped,' he shrugs. 'Not everybody likes what I do. But when you take risks, you must be prepared for controversy.'

This confidence is the source of his strength and inspiration. He knows his worth, the value of the tradition he has inherited, and the power of the phenomenal skills of his fingertips.

It is not obstinacy but conviction which steels his resolve to innovate, to experiment. He may go off the beaten track sometimes, but never beyond the territory bequeathed to him by five generations of musician ancestors. Their experiments with craft and content have helped to shape the sarod as we know it today. Amjad Ali Khan's own contribution to its range and resonance have been highly significant. He remains humble, because he knows that he is not just himself—but the representative of a line of maestros in a rich gharana.

It must be remembered that he was born and brought up in the princely state of Gwalior, which is still haunted by the legendary Tansen. Close to his own ancestral home stands that tamarind tree, whose leaves are believed to have magical properties that sweeten the voice.

Gwalior was the capital of the Scindia dynasty which has patronized generations of musicians. And it was here that Amjad's great grandfather Ghulam Ali Khan practised the sarod and made it as versatile as the veena and the sitar. His son Nanne Khan followed the older classical style of the dhrupad, more exacting and rigid in grammar than the then nascent khyal mode of romantic expressionism. Amjad's father Hafiz Ali Khan studied the *beenkar* tradition under the venerable Wazir Khan of Rampur, and dhrupad from the descendants of Swami Haridas in Mathura. He was exceptionally skilled in handling the wistful melodies of the *thumri*, having studied it with Bhayya Saheb Ganapat Raoji of Gwalior. All the streams flowed into Amjad Ali, producing a style so personal and original, that it was impossible to identify the original separate sources.

Amjad was born when his father was sixty-five years old. This meant that his father was at his mellowest peak as a musician while on the wane as a man. The teaching and the learning had a sense of urgency, a desperation even, which drove Amjad to great levels of intensity. He had to sacrifice his childhood and mature quickly in order to meet the demands his father made of him. Both were aware of the sands trickling rapidly down in the hour glass, especially as the father had been disappointed musically in his older sons and nephew.

Amjad AH Khan was not overwhelmed by the rigour and discipline. It made him a contemplative performer even in adolescence. Amjad Ah carries the hallmark of the old school still—in the timbre and tonal clarity of his strokes, in slow and medium, as well as in the hurricane speeds he revels in.

His critics and fans will both agree that Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, son and disciple of the legendary Hafiz Ali Khan, is touched by greatness, not only as a brilliant exponent of a demanding instrument, but as the conscientious torch-bearer of a tradition to be passed on to posterity.

### SPEAKING STRINGS

When a man is fifty years old as I am now—with all the responsibilities that grown-ups have to face everyday, at home, at work, in bringing up their own children—it is very nice to think about the days of childhood.

Was my childhood so joyful? So carefree? So full of contentment? Perhaps not. But it gave me something invaluable—a splendid heritage in music, and a father's love.

There were two brothers and two sisters before me. I was the youngest child in our family and extremely pampered. But not spoilt. You will soon see why.

First of all, I was born into a family of musicians. My ancestors came from Kabul in Afghanistan and settled in the kingdom of Gwalior. For four generations they were honoured musicians in the court of the maharajas of the Scindia dynasty.

In the past Gwalior had been rich in music. It was the birthplace of Tansen, the illustrious singer. He was one of the jewels of Emperor Akbar's Mughal *durbar* (court). It is said that when Tansen sang Raga Todi, the deer came leaping out of the forests. If he sang Raga Deepak, there was a burst of fire. If he sang Malhar, the black clouds brought rain. He left such a stamp upon some raags that we still call them by his name. We say

Mian ki Todi, or Mian Ki Malhar. No, we don't say Tansen ki Malhar or Tansen ki Todi. That would not be respectful.

Even today Tansen's *samadhi* (tomb) in Gwalior remains a holy place for musicians. They consider it a privilege to participate in the annual music festival held in his honour.

Is it surprising that the earliest sounds I remember should be those of music? My father Hafiz Ali Khan was a great musician. He played the sarod. He also sang in a voice both sweet and powerful. Those were the vibrations which surrounded me as a child.

Another factor which made a difference in my upbringing was that my father was old enough to be my grandfather. He was sixty years old. This meant I could not jump on his shoulder or ride on his back. I could not play any games with him. He was also my guru, my teacher. I had to be very respectful; I could not take liberties with him as other children could with their fathers. Of course, sometimes my father hugged me and petted me. This was only when *he* felt like it. I could not dream of giving him a bear hug or a sudden kiss. I was awed by his age and his greatness as a musician. My mother Begum Raahat Jahaan was good and kind. But she did not know how to demonstrate her love except by giving me the best food in the house. She was always busy. She had a large household to run.

The real loss was something I came to feel much later. My father was one of the foremost Hindustani musicians of his time. But I never heard him at his peak. There were very few albums of his music. He was afraid to record it because he thought the music may be used for entertainment. What if it blared through loudspeakers at parties, weddings and tea-shops? Anyway, we could not afford a gramophone then. Why, I still remember the day a Philips radio, worth 150 rupees, came to our house! It was a big event for us. But father was worried. He thought his children would listen to film songs and go astray. It is true that my sisters had a craze for film songs which they tried to hide from father. But what can you expect? In our *khandani* Muslim families, girls were not allowed to learn or to perform music. Naturally they turned to film songs. I suspect it was my father's interest in 'Khabren Hindustan' (as the news programme was called then) which made him risk the dangers of the radio at last!

There was a big age gap between me and my brothers. They could not be my playmates. My elder brothers and I shared some lessons in vocal music. Father taught us at first. Later he appointed Master Gune for more formal training. My father had decided that I was to be a sarod player like him. But he believed that knowing vocal music was essential for me to become a better instrumentalist. He also engaged a tabla teacher for me. This was Pandit Raghuvan Dayal. I grew so fond of the tabla that my father became anxious. What if I became a drummer? I had to carry on the family tradition. I had to become a sarod player.

Let me tell you a little about our family instrument now. My ancestor Mohammed

Hashmi Khan Bangash was a Pathan horse trader in Afghanistan. When he came to live in central India he brought with him an ancient Persian instrument called the rabab. It had strings to be plucked for playing or accompanying folk tunes. It had a staccato sound. That means it could play only with lots of breaks, more like rhythm beats.

His son Ghulam Bandagi Khan wanted to play Indian classical music on the rabab. But the rabab could not hold a note long enough to play a raga. So he made changes in

the instrument. He gave it a metal chest and metal strings. The rabab became the sarod. The word comes from ‘sarood’ which in Persian, means ‘melody’. Grandson Ghulam Ali Khan polished the methods of playing Indian raags on the sarod. He became a famous artist. He was honoured by Maharaja Vishwanath Singh of Rewa and Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Lucknow. The Maharaja of Gwalior made him his court musician and rewarded him with many gifts and a house in Gwalior.

Such were the ancestors of my grandfather Nanne Khan who trained many disciples in the family instrument. Soon the sarod became as popular as the sitar or the shehnai. Though it continued to have some drawbacks, my father said that a great sarodist has no limitations. He could make it sing and cry and laugh and love. And do you know, when I heard my father play, I found that what he said was true.

Most children only know their fathers and grandfathers. But I know musicians of five generations in my family, not just as names, but as living presences. They had developed our school of music called the Senia gharana. Whenever I play, those masters are with me, setting standards, insisting on quality.

I must have been a difficult child. When father asked me to study other musicians for their special qualities I came up with innumerable comments. I would ask endless questions. ‘Tell me, how is it that the same *taan* (a kind of musical phrase) sounds different on sitar and sarod? How do you play a song on the sarod? Can the sarod imitate the human voice? Why is it that so much cannot be done on the sarod?’ Sometimes my father used to get annoyed. ‘Arey, you fire questions all the time. You cross-examine me! Are you a lawyer? A barrister?’ But he would explain many things. I kept experimenting on the strings. I kept trying. Once in a while I would burst out in frustration, ‘The sarod is all incomplete instrument.’ Then father would smile lovingly and say, ‘No, *beta*, it is a difficult instrument. If you have patience and courage, you can do wonders with it.’

If you listen to my old records you will see how my style has changed over the years. All the changes I made began in my childhood.

A lot has been done: improvements have been made by me and other sarod players. My mind is still full of new ideas. But sometimes I feel that the atmosphere in our country is not very helpful to a classical musician. If only I had been born twenty years ago! How many people understand what I am doing on the sarod now? Even my fellow musicians don’t appreciate and encourage my efforts. It is very painful.

In the past, artists were not like that. I remember how my father went up to the stage and took the microphone to praise young Vilayat Khan who was giving a sitar concert. My father said: ‘This boy’s father died when he was just nine years old. But he has achieved so much on his own. I am proud of him.’ Tell me, are musicians so generous to each other now?

Just as I lose heart like this I get a shot in the arm. After a concert in Bangalore, film star Dilip Kumar came to me and said, ‘You have changed the entire style of this instrument. Wonderful!’ A comment like this makes me so happy. Appreciating the work of others makes life pleasant for all of us.

I was born in the room where my father, grandfather and great grandfather had been born. No hospitals or nursing homes in those days! This was in the *haveli* type of house the Scindia kings had gifted to my ancestors. It still stands in the old street. I have set up

a Trust in my father's name so that our house can be used as a centre for the arts —for singing, dancing and art exhibitions.

My father was the head of a large family of brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins and their brood of children. Some twenty to twenty-five of them lived with us in this house. They were not only housed and fed but the bills for whatever they bought in the town's shops were also paid by my father. Most of my father's students also stayed with us in the haveli. They came from many parts of India. One of them was Padmanabhan from south India. He became a 'devotee' of my father's voice and learnt vocal music from him. He was the brother of Rukmini Devi Arundale, the great dancer who set up Kalakshetra, an art institution in Madras. Little did I know then that I was to marry Subhalakshmi, a student of Rukmini Devi in Kalakshetra.

My father was a saint. He thought only of two things: music and God. He was a religious man in the best sense of the term, not a fanatic but a faithful believer. He did his *namaaz* five times a day. To see him praying was to be uplifted in spirit.

Next to our Gwalior home was a big, imposing mosque—so close as to make it seem as if our haveli was an extension of it. Hundreds of pigeons would roost and flutter around its dome. They would fly over our house in flocks and peck at the grain my mother scattered for them on the terrace. They were not afraid of my father. Whenever he came up to the terrace they would cluster around him and settle upon his head and shoulders. Then he would say, 'Are my pets hungry? Didn't they get enough to eat?'

An old maulvi used to say the *azaan*, which is the prayer from the mosque. Sometimes he went terribly off-key. Father could not bear it. He would stride up to the mosque and tell the maulvi, 'Here, let me say the *azaan* today.' He felt that Allah should not be offended by *besura* (tuneless) prayers! Father's *azaan* was beautiful, vibrant, resonant and full of rapture. Usually you don't think of *azaan* as music. But it has deep, melodious sounds. The Koran says that the Prophet chose a man with a good voice to say the *azaan*. Doesn't this show that the Prophet enjoyed music?

As I told you, my father was old when I was born, past his prime as an artist. The art world can be ruthless too. He had to face all kinds of jealousies and intrigues in his old age. There were moments of sadness and moments of happiness for him in bringing me up. I was his only hope. I had to develop a sense of duty very early to live up to that hope. Friends and well-wishers would say to me, 'The responsibility of the family is on you now.'

Yes, I did have two elder brothers—Mubarak and Rehmat. But they disappointed everyone. The eldest had given major concerts at eighteen. He was brilliant. But, perhaps because of bad company and hobbies like hunting, he frittered his life away. Ahmed Ali Khan was my father's nephew who served him devotedly. My father had great hopes for him. But he never fulfilled his promise. My father thought that someone had cast a spell on his food to ruin his voice. Ahmed was also mentally affected. I had heard him play the sarod. What firm hands he had, what stamina! And what fantastic skill! How sad for my father to see it all go waste!

I remember Gwalior when I was a child. It had all the pomp and splendour of a princely state. Everybody used to wear turbans and topi's. We couldn't enter the palace unless we dressed formally in achkan and *churidar*. Sometimes I performed in the durbar

before my father's recital. My tabla accompanist was Sajjan Lal, whose ancestors had been great drummers. Today he is a singer. I still remember grand visitors like Marshal Tito and Babu Rajendra Prasad. Royal receptions were given to them. I was presented to all these state guests as a child prodigy.

Until I left Gwalior at age eleven, my life was very sheltered and protected. Father did not encourage me to make friends with the neighbourhood children because they came from backgrounds very different from mine. They were sons of shopkeepers and small businessmen. He did not send me to the Scindia School. It was an excellent boarding school, but father would not allow me to stay in the hostel. And I felt like a fish out of water in the school nearby to which I was sent. I made an honest effort to study, but how could I when I felt a misfit all the time?

You see, a child growing up in Bengal or Maharashtra or Tamil Nadu has culture all around him. In Gwalior, few people understood the arts or valued them as they had been in the past days of glory, I was lonely. I could not spend much time in the games field either. There was always *riyaz* (practice) to be done, and music classes. I felt even then that music was the most important thing in my life.

My brothers had little time for my father. I felt it was therefore my duty to spend time with him. And he needed looking after. Once when a group of visitors came to see him in the middle of his class, he motioned to them to sit down. Then he began to sing a raag elaborately, in all three speeds. The poor fellows couldn't get away though they were obviously in a hurry. My father ended the *bandish* (a musical composition) and had got ready to launch into another when I whispered to him, 'Ask them why they are here.' It turned out that they had come to invite us for a family wedding!

One event stands out in my mind, vividly and powerfully.

A sadhu baba used to be a frequent visitor. He came and went as he liked, without notice or warning. He wore saffron robes. He had a handsome face with long black hair and a beard. His piercing eyes and commanding air made him a striking figure. He was passionately fond of music, and would sit listening to my father, eyes closed and body swaying. Sometimes his deep voice would blend with my father's in a devotional song: '*Madina na dekha to kuch bhi na dekha*' ('You have seen nothing if you have not seen Madina'). Tears would stream from his eyes. My father told me that he was a Sufi mystic whose faith went beyond ordinary religion. My father presented me to the sadhu and I played for him what I had learnt that day.

He listened with rapt attention, never taking his eyes off me. When I finished he asked my father, 'What is the little one's name?'

'Masoom Ali Khan,' father answered. Yes, Masoom or 'innocent' was the name I was given by my parents.

The sadhu shook his head and said, 'I name him Amjad. From now on let him be called by this new name.'

That is how I got my present name. It means 'most glorious', an Arabic name for God. I never saw the sadhu after that.

The years of my childhood were very eventful for India. We got our independence from the British Raj and faced the horrors of communal riots when Pakistan and India were partitioned.

My father, though a staunch Muslim, was never worried about personal danger. He sent his family to safety in Bhopal and continued to stay in his home on the main street. He would sit by the window and watch the disturbances outside. The rioting Hindus would stop and say, ‘*Namaskar*, Khansaheb! Are you all right?’ No one tried to hurt a hair of his head though other Muslims suffered badly in the riots. Such was the respect in which art and artists were held in those days.

Many top-ranking musicians were Muslims. Most of their audience was Hindu. But this difference in religion never came in the way of performance or its enjoyment.

I remember a *mehfil* (gathering) in a nobleman’s house, where a well-known pandit sang my father played and there was discussion about the right way to play a particular raga. My father told the pandit point-blank, ‘You sang it all wrong. This is how it should be sung,’ and demonstrated the proper method. The patron was a wealthy Hindu, the listeners “were all influential Hindus of the town, the singer was a pandit. Here was a Mussalman rebuking him in public. And everyone agreed that Ustad Hafiz AH Khan was right.

My father had a high regard for these knowledgeable listeners who were alive to every note, every beat. He had great respect for the Scindia ruler of his time who knew the minutest aspects of music. Sad to say, his descendants seem to have no time for the classical music their ancestors had nourished lovingly.

My father used to broadcast on the radio sometimes. For that we would go to Delhi. Once when we attended a garden party at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, President Rajendra Prasad asked my father if he wished for anything from the state. My father replied in all seriousness, ‘Yes sir, the Raga Durbari Kanada is in great danger. If you don’t protect it, its purity will be forever lost to India.’

In 1957, Miss Nirmal Joshi, the first secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, brought many leading artists to Delhi. Shambhu Maharaj the great kathak dancer, Thirakwa Saheb the tabla maestro, the Dagar brothers who sang dhrupad style, Siddheswari Devi the singer of thumris, Wahid Khan Saheb the sitarist, Sundarprasadji the dance guru, and my father Hafiz AH Khan, were among those who were settled in an artists’ colony called the Ferozeshah Hutmants. These cottages were put up by the government.

You can imagine what a wonderful gathering it was, with creative work and exchanges going on all the time between these masters. To me the experience of being in their midst was sheer magic. The great Mushtaq Husain Khan of Rampur taught me some songs, and Moinuddin Dagar showed me how to sing dhrupads. I sometimes had the privilege of playing the tabla for Sundar Prasadji and Shambhu Maharaj-ji. So many styles and methods! So many ways of shaping beauty!

It was not always the serious business of art. Everyone was full of fun and laughter. We shared everything, even the food. One day someone would distribute home-made *halwa*, another day somebody else would bring *pakodas* and so on.

Those musicians really loved me. I was the only child of that age in the colony, and in constant demand. ‘Run and get beedis’, ‘Go fetch paan’, ‘Arey, where are the matches?’

'Bring a jug of water'. Shambhu Maharaj would tease me, 'Son, you are a stage performer. You can buy me a cigarette.' His nephew Birju Maharaj who is today our greatest Kathak dancer, was a young boy then. We became good friends. We often practiced together—he with his *ghunghroos* (ankle bells) and I with my sarod. We would race into incredibly fast rhythms and see who got tired first. Sometimes I would play the tabla while he danced. We tried to build up energy, strength and stamina by challenging each other. It was great fun. We are still very good friends but where is the time for such carefree exchanges? We have to be satisfied with meetings at festivals outside Delhi!

Some well-wishers reminded father that he ought to send me to school. I was admitted to the prestigious Modern School nearby. My sons go to the same school now. The principal, Mr M.N. Kapoor, was a remarkable man. He realized that my goal in life was music. He relaxed rules for me, gave me permission to skip evening games for my music class and practice. While my classmates ran to the playfields, I cycled home to my sarod.

I knew that school learning was important and I tried hard, but some of it was very tough. Though I could bring off the most difficult rhythms on sarod and tabla, simple sums on paper proved too much for me!

I had to make other adjustments too. I come from a family whose members are courteous even to little children. But in the Delhi school, manners were rough and ready. The blunt speech jarred on my nerves. The boys didn't understand my interests. 'Kyon tun tun karta rehta hai tu?' ('Why are you always tinkling away?') they would tease me. To please them I played film songs on the sarod. Of course, if my father had known he would have been furious. But it was good training. Let me tell you, playing any song on the sarod is difficult. Thanks to the boys' insistence I learnt to do it quite early. In time I made friends, and became popular when I won shields and trophies for the school in music competitions, I still keep in touch with them. Friends made in school always remain special.

My children face the same kind of problems in school. Their situation is worse because there are so many more mindless distractions today: satellite television, cable, video and so on. I know they listen to pop music. I don't mind. I have given them the choice I did not have. They can take up classical music if they want to. There are no pressures on them to do so. But luckily they are serious about the sarod and learn eagerly whenever I teach them. They have performed with me since they were little children, just as I did with my father; I think this is entirely due to the blessings of my ancestors. Yes, they do put up pictures of rock stars in their room, but also pictures of great Hindustani musicians.

Indian classical musicians will often tell you proudly, 'In my childhood I used to practise twelve to eighteen hours a day!' Such marathon efforts are not necessary. If you are in the right hands, if your guru teaches you the right methods of practice, two hours in the morning and two in the evening are enough. My father had researched practice methods and showed me how to vary and distribute exercises. I passed them on to my children who have to juggle with more activities than I had, in sports and studies. .

I told you that I started performing on the stage as a child. In 1957 I was in Madras with my father playing at the Music Academy. It had only a thatched pandal then, but what inspiring concerts! That is where I saw Balasaraswati the Bharatanatyam dancer and Shambhu Maharaj showing each other *bhav*—or ways of expression. In 1958 I was at the

Sadarang Music Conference in Calcutta. My tabla accompanist was the famous Karamatullah Khan. In 1966 the Prayag Sangeet Samiti gave me the tide of Sarod Samrat, which means the emperor of sarod! I was barely fifteen.

My sons Amaan and Ayaan say they are always excited but also rather nervous before a stage performance. I used to feel the same at their age. You see, the children in a musician's family are exposed to the stage early in life. How to sit next to the guru, how to stand and bow—all this is part of their training. Many top musicians who don't get such exposure continue to suffer from stage fright all their lives. They are unable to look at members of the audience. But eye contact is essential. It makes a performance warm and personal for the listener. I was shy. But I made an effort to open my eyes, to talk, to smile ... that is also a *sadhana*. Mind you, not easy!

My father's increasing deafness had been a problem for me. In Delhi this got worse. I had to literally shout to be heard, and sing into his ear for him to be satisfied I was on the right track.

Father was invited to play at Sapru House in 1964. He was almost stone-deaf by then. He went up to the stage, and presented me as the artist of the evening. That was my trial by fire. I simply had to do well enough to please a distinguished audience who had come to hear the musical genius Hafiz Ali Khan.

I picked up courage by remembering the success of my first foreign tour a year before. It was organized by the Asia Music Society. A group of Indian artists went on a concert tour of the USA. The response was wonderful. I enjoyed it very much, especially because my childhood friend Birju Maharaj was with us. He often played tabla to my sarod. My father was terrified of air travel. He came to send me off in a state of anxiety and was there again at the airport to bless me when I returned.

I was earning money from a very young age. Father got a pension, but it was hardly enough for our large family. My earnings helped a lot. I remember some very funny incidents of those times.

Once, when I went to play at a festival in Allahabad the organizers could not spot me at the railway station. I waited and waited while they ran about searching for a white-haired, wrinkled ustad! Finally, I was identified and brought to the guest house. By that time I was ravenous. But no food came. The caterers looked for an old man and left when they couldn't find him. Salamat and Nazakat Ali, the famous singers, were in the next room. They found me and fed me on the apples they had brought—the best I have ever tasted!

At another time I had no train reservation and managed to get into a compartment with a government cash box guarded by soldiers. They saw my sarod and asked me to play. 'Come on, show us what you can do.' I racked my brains to see how I could please them. Suddenly I remembered a popular film song of Mukesh and that's what I strummed on the sarod. 'Dam dam diga diga...' went the strings. The men began to tap their feet and clap their hands. They took good care of me on that trip.

At yet another time I reached Howrah station in Calcutta to catch the train for Delhi. I got off the taxi and found that I had only the ticket, no money! My purse had been left behind. I was fifteen years old. I borrowed money from the coolie to pay the taxi and borrowed from a fellow passenger to pay the coolie. When we reached Delhi, I borrowed

from the coolie to pay the passenger, and from the taxi driver to pay the coolie. Fortunately I could pay the taxi driver with my own money when I reached home.

When I look into the past I see that my father and guru, Ustad Hafiz Ali Khan, has been the greatest influence and inspiration in my life—not just in passing on the family legacy of music, but in making me realize the importance of faith, of complete trust in God.

For I do believe, like my father did, that everything, however small or big, depends entirely on God's will. It is He who created the seven notes of music, and all the sounds and rhythms which are the basis of life—whether laughter or tears, pulse throb or heartbeat. I believe God created the seven notes to unite all the people in the world through music, to make them feel they are members of a single family.

More than anything else, I am eager that my sons should become good musicians. I wonder about the risks they may have to take, the hurdles they will have to cross. But I don't brood. I don't worry about their future. If we make too many decisions what is left for God to do? Just as God blessed me, He will bless my sons' efforts.

I tell my children to do their best. I also tell them, 'Whatever you wish to do, work hard at it. With patience, sincerity and faith. There is Someone to take care of the rest.'

## VIJAY TENDULKAR

'Sir, I interviewed you two years ago for my newspaper. We are thinking of publishing the interview now. Can you help me update it?'

Journalists have to be brazen.

But only a strong sense of the ridiculous could make a 'star' writer respond to such a request with a 'Come along!', and even write to that journalist later to say: 'Thanks for sending me a copy of the published interview. I couldn't make out what I had said from what you had written. But I liked your letter which came with it.'

If you know Vijay Tendulkar through his plays you expect the man to be fierce and ruthless. Listen to him on subjects ranging from theatre to terrorism and you will see that he can be biting and caustic. Add to this a purposeful stride, a piercing glance, a penchant for controversies—and what do you get?

The Marathi writer has been continually criticized for exaggerating 'the spiritual bankruptcy of the degenerate socio-cultural milieu in which we live'. He is accused of promoting a defeatist apathy, and of titillating the viewer with neo-realistic projections of squalor, violence, crime and perversions—on stage, cinema and television. But he has also been acclaimed as one of India's best living playwrights.

Starting as an apprentice in a bookshop, Tendulkar graduated to reading proofs and heading a printing press. He managed public relations in a business house and worked as assistant editor for three Marathi dailies—*Navbharat*, *Maratha* and *Loksatta*. The newspaper office sharpened his writing skills by providing exposure to contemporary happenings. The rise of a communal organization and its unleashing of terror upon hapless communities became a landmark in Indian theatre as *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1973).

For its blend of history, politics and fable, Tendulkar crafted a unique structure of folk forms. The *Indian Express* expose of slave trade in village India became *Kamala* (1982). A single sentence from a news report about a mob killing a young man sank deep and surfaced on a new wave as the trend-setting film *Nishant* (1975).

From the beginning Tendulkar examined the components of violence with clinical ardour. ‘The individual becomes fascinating in moments of strong self-assertion,’ he explains. ‘A violent man reacts strongly to the situation. He doesn’t care what happens afterwards. Whether he is right or wrong is another matter.’

While he claims that he has written several plays ‘as non-violent as Gandhi himself, he adds under his breath, ‘But no one reads them.’ Mickey Mouse is his metaphor for the human struggle for existence.’ In this battle one mouse kills another. Many mice gang up and ruthlessly destroy each other. I see this as a sort of blind justice.’

Tendulkar has matched a remarkable range of themes with forms equally varied and innovative. He is a master of the spoken word. From whisper to roar, from clamour to silence, he makes words explode into discoveries for the listener. He electrifies viewers with the physical and mental torture human beings inflict upon each other in individual relationships, in group interactions, in the brutalities practised by the state. The treatment is urgent, insistent and chilling, as in *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* (1968), *Gidhade* (1971), *Kanyadaan* (1983) (stage plays) and *Manthan* (1977), *Aakrosh* (1980), *Ardh Satya* (1983) and *Akriet* (1981) (screenplays). His study of the nation-builder Vallabhbhai Patel in *Sardar* (1994) has uncovered an area of modern history for debate and revaluation.

‘Does sadism exist only in the police officer and the state machine?’ Tendulkar asks you. ‘I know many people, outwardly decent, who enjoy torturing their wives. So, when I deal with what you call perversion, I am drawing your attention to something near you, which you either don’t recognize, or don’t want to see.’

In recent re-readings I was surprised to sense that Tendulkar’s leitmotif is not horror (as I had thought all along), but compassion—an objective compassion for both victim and victimizer. After all, as the playwright sees it, the oppressor of today is the victim of tomorrow, while the victim of today waits for his chance to turn predator. In this endless see-saw of exploitation, suffering arouses savagery. It does not ennoble man.

In Tendulkar’s world there is no calm after the storm, only weariness and disillusionment. The playwright would nod his head wisely and say it is the experience effacing truth, of accepting reality. And since that reality is elusive and ever changing, he has to continue writing in order to keep finding it afresh.

### **VIEW FROM THE BALCONY**

See that child over there? Yes, that little one on the second-floor balcony, standing on tiptoe, his wide eyes glued to the street below . . .

Down on the street the horse-drawn Victorias clip-clop sedately, making way for the cars which appear now and then. There are more pedestrians than vehicles. Their pace is slow, unhurried. A tram hoots in the distance.

The street hawkers are busy crying out their wares. The words don't matter. It is the unique and special sounds they make which identify them individually. There's the Chinaman shuffling by, his flat face hidden under the wide-brimmed hat. A huge bundle of cloth swells behind his bent back. It is tied to the pole that he rests on his shoulder.

There's that beggar again, the local regular who comes every Sunday morning with a big clay pot on top of his round, bald head. Is the pot fixed to the head? It stays there though he doesn't even touch it with his little finger. He makes it spin like a dizzy top, by moving his body in a certain rhythm as he snakes through the street, begging from shop to shop. The pot seems part of the man. The man seems an extension of the pot. They belong to each other. The beggar disappears where the street curves in the distance. He will not come for another week.

A shrill whistle—and a handcart rolls by. It is not an ordinary cart. It has two huge boards leaning on one another to make a triangle. On the boards a handsome man smiles roguishly at a pretty girl. A warrior god raises his sword to strike a demon. A woman with a child in her arms weeps endless tears. These posters advertise the film shows in the city theatres.

A man frolics and prances in front of the cart. His costume is crazily fanciful—like the joker in a pack of playing cards. He blows an ear-splitting bugle to make sure no one misses his passage down the street.

The newspaper man comes in the afternoon. He does not bring a bundle of papers on a cycle. Nor does he push the papers mechanically under each door. He ambles along, shouting a headline now and then. It is an arresting wheedle, impossible to ignore. Though he announces the arrival of a copy fresh from the press, his headline never varies, Everyday it is the same phrase, same tone, same tuneful glide:

*'Jaapaan chya rajala dhekoon chawla'*—'A bug bites the emperor of Japan.'

No, that's not all. There's a punch line to follow. A daily philosophy.

*'Ch... aaa...wv...l... aa tarch...aaa.... ww ..,l... aa'* —'Let it bite, so what?'

I have travelled a long way from that balcony and that age. I have watched many shows since then. But I have perhaps never experienced quite the same thrill in later life.

Yes, I was that little boy, spellbound by those street scenes of Bombay long ago. But what a different Bombay! It is very difficult now to imagine what the city looked like in the 1930s. Bombay was just a small town then, not the sprawling metropolis we know today. South Bombay was more or less all of it. There was hardly anything beyond Dadar.

Common to both the old Bombay and the new Bombay are the communal riots. I remember the violent outbreaks very clearly. Twice from my balcony I saw incidents of stabbing. They did not frighten me. I was too young to know death and suffering. I was excited by the spectacle.

I was born and brought up right in the heart of town, in Kandevadi, a small lane in Girgaon. A lower middle-class community crowded its tenements. The men were mostly shopkeepers and clerks.

Ours was a typical *chawl*. It had apartments of one room, kitchen and balcony, and common toilets. Privacy was unknown.

My brother Raghunath and sister Leela were many years older than me. Two sisters born after them died in infancy. I was a sickly child. I had a persistent cough and asthmatic wheezing. This made my parents over-protective. I was special and precious to them. They were afraid of losing me if they were not careful. Two younger brothers were born much later. But I remained the favourite.

For a long time my mother dressed me like a girl. She made me wear frocks and a *bindi* on my forehead. People must have laughed but it didn't bother me then. I was my mother's pet, known as a 'mother's child'. And this close relationship became stronger through the years until she passed away.

A painful early memory is of being force-fed all the time. My mother would pinch my nose to make me open my mouth. Quickly she would push some food in. I was never hungry. So I resisted. Sometimes I threw up. This must have been a big problem for my parents. The doctor said I was undernourished. But how could they make me eat properly with me throwing tantrums at the sight of food?

I remember two doctors attending on me, old and white haired. Both had long, drooping moustaches. When they bent down to examine me, those moustaches became a terrible temptation. I simply had to pull them! It must have hurt, but luckily for me, the doctors took it in their stride,

My poor health was responsible for my being rather luxuriously carried to school by our family servant. In school no one forced me to study. I came from a family slightly better off than those of my schoolmates. I looked different, I was better groomed, I even carried story books which my teachers borrowed from me! Those teachers were partial to me; they left me alone and let me pass every examination. At home, too, there were no pressures to study.

I was very happy in the municipal school. It had small, dingy rooms and awful toilets, at times without water. But I made many friends. There was no playground in that school. We had to push our desks into a corner for our physical training period inside the class. There was a dusty back lane for games. While at home we managed to play under the staircase. At nine I was put into a more expensive high school. It had a difficult name—Chikitsaka Samooha—and I had a difficult time there. I could not feel at home with those well-to-do children. I was miserable in the big, clean, newly whitewashed building.

My father Dhondopant Tendulkar, was head clerk at a British publishing firm called Longmans, Green and Company (now Orient Longman). His parents had lost many children and when my father was born, they thought they would trick the gods by calling him 'Dhonda' which means stone. With a name like that surely the gods would think he was not worth taking away, and would let him live on earth with his parents.

Father was an enthusiastic writer, director and actor of amateur plays in my mother tongue, Marathi. He was invited to join a professional theatre company but refused because in those days a career in the theatre was not considered respectable. Even for rehearsals father's group had to make do with what they could get, sometimes a room without electricity.

From the time I was four years old, I was taken to those rehearsals. They were a kind of magic show for me. That's where I saw living persons change into characters. At that time women's roles were played by men. Imagine my amazement when I saw some of

the actors suddenly changing their voice and movements to become women. They didn't wear saris, but in some mysterious way their pants and shirts stopped identifying them as men. I often fell asleep in the middle of those rehearsals. I suppose father carried me home. All I knew was that I woke up in my bed the next morning.

Except for what my father staged, I never saw any theatre. In fact, at that time, there wasn't much to see in professional theatre.

Raghunath, my brother, used to act too, arid, like father, he was interested in literature. Writers often came home, so I grew up in a kind of literary atmosphere.

Father had very enthusiastically published a few books by his writer friends. Since he had no bookshop, he could not sell them. They lay in dusty piles on a wooden stand at home. Those books became my play-things.

When I became a little older, I found novels and short stories of leading writers at home. Even before I understood what I read, I became a voracious reader of good books. Much of it puzzled me, but somehow I never asked for explanations.

I was six years old when I wrote something that was not part of my studies or homework. I wrote essays and stories which I showed my father. He loved me and so he probably liked my work. But neither then, nor later in life when I became an established writer, did he ever praise me to my face. It was against his policy to do such a thing.

Little fairs used to be held frequently in Bombay. They still are, but if I go to a fair now, it seems small and silly. When I was a child, a fair was a fairyland, enormous, endless. There were magic shows and fabulous freaks—a cow with six legs, a man with two heads, a woman with four arms, and the ultimate thrill of the headless man. My father always took me to the fair on certain festival days, though never once did he include mother or the other children on these trips.

Like most boys I wanted to become an engine driver. But when father took me to the circus, I wanted to become an acrobat. I loved the circus. Every time I went, it was as wonderful as the first time. What a gigantic tent! It could have held the entire world! I also got to see the roadside acrobats called *dombaris*. They belonged to a special community which made its living by street shows. I dreamed of joining them and going from place to place, astonishing bigger and bigger crowds by my daredevil acts.

In those days there was no real communication between parents and children. My parents took care of me, nursed me when I fell ill, gave me everything I asked for. But I don't remember sitting and talking to them comfortably. That happened much later, when I became an adult.

On Sunday mornings father took me to a large bookshop owned by his publisher friend. While the grown-ups chatted, I wandered among the shelves and picked up all the books I wanted. Even in those days Marathi had a good collection of children's books. Father bought them all for me and would often tell me stories from them.

We had a fixed routine for Sunday evenings. Father took me to play on the sands at Chowpatty beach. A local train ran between Dadar and Colaba. Sands stretched on both sides of the route. And beyond, on the west, lay the sea. I would insist on travelling by that train, both up and down, from Charni Road to Colaba, not just once, but two or three times. I made such a fuss that father had to let me have my way. How thrilling it was to

look through the window, my hair whipped by the breeze, my heart beating to the chug-chug of the wheels!

Summer vacation took us out of the city to Goa or to Port Ratnagiri. The family enjoyed a holiday while father returned to his work in Bombay. He came back to escort us home again. I have not been able to forget two experiences on those trips. One was a dreadful smell which suddenly hit us as we went out walking. We traced it to the rotting body of a cat in a ditch. I was hypnotized by it; I refused to move and had to be hauled away. I can still recall that stomach-churning stench.

At another time I was taken to the beach. Mother talked to her friends and I built sand-castles. Suddenly I felt the urge to rush to my mother. I ran and hugged her tight. But I dropped my hands at once as if I had been stung. It was not mother, but someone else. The woman laughed pleasantly, but somehow I have not forgotten that sense of shock and shame—the feel of another woman instead of my mother.

I don't think Raghunath and Leela were jealous of the attention I got, though Leela often complained that my parents treated her as if she was inferior to the boys.

Toys were sold in provision stores then. And toys which moved on springs were a novelty. I had quite a collection of them—a marching soldier, a walking dog, a sweeper who cleaned the floor with her broom ... you wound the key and they sprang into action. I remember a train, my first imported toy. It must have been very costly. But father bought it for me.

I spent much of my time on the balcony, alone or with other children. They envied me my toys. Sometimes I shared things, at other times I was possessive. We played many games, an all-time favourite being *bhatukli*, in which we pretended to run a household with father, mother and naughty children.

A visit to the haircutting saloon was something special. Normally, we would call the barber home and get it done under the staircase. In the saloon, along with film-stars, King George V and Queen Mary glared down from the walls. I glared back from my stool placed on top of a chair, my legs dangling in the air.

You can see that my father spent a lot of time with me. He pampered me and showered me with gifts. He took care of me when I was sick. He took me out and told me stories. I should have adored him as he deserved.

But strangely enough I didn't like him. Only when I grew up did my feelings change.

There was no reason for this indifference. Perhaps it began in very early childhood. I remember a scene vividly in which my mother holds me tight, protectively, behind closed doors. Father stands before her, in dim daylight, angry and menacing. My mother is afraid, she feels threatened. I can sense it. There is no sound-track to this chilling visual. Perhaps this wordless experience was at the root of the distance I felt between myself and my father.

My mother Susheela did not get beyond primary school, but she read, thought and developed a lot through life. She was a courageous woman who had to deal with an impractical, stubborn, honest-to-the-roots husband.

It was my mother who told me that father had been a hot-tempered man, a strict disciplinarian. That is how Raghunath and Leela knew him. They were afraid of him. But

all that changed when I was born. He became soft and gentle, docile and caring. Why did he change? My mother said it was because I was born under an auspicious star!

In his last years father suffered terribly in body and mind. I was not a child then, so I understood his miseries. The family was in bad shape. There was little money. My elder brother had quarrelled with father and left home. My sister had to work to support the family. She had to stay single because father refused to do what middle-class men did to get their daughters married—he refused to make her a show-piece and pay a dowry. My mother blamed him for these failures.

At the office people looked out for jobs where they could get bribes. They sat at the counter and asked for ‘extra fee’ for quick work. This was called the ‘side income’. That is how they built houses, got daughters married and sons established. To an idealist like my father, poverty meant honesty and self-respect. He was a pious man; he performed elaborate pujas everyday, and read books on spiritual matters. Dhondopant Tendulkar was proud to be poor. But despite his ideals, he failed to win the love of his family members until it was too late.

I must tell you about my brother Raghunath. It was he who brought the fiery spirit of nationalism into our house. Inspired by Gandhi, he got himself a *charkha*, wore only khadi and attended Congress meetings. He was blacklisted in college for his political activities. My mother had told me stories about Mahatma Gandhi and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. She had heard Tilak’s rousing speeches at Ganesh festivals in Bombay. My brother made these leaders seem real, their goals urgent. My father had hoped Raghunath would excel in studies, but his brilliance gave way to erratic behaviour. Once he even tried committing suicide. Why? Because he was head-over-ears in love with an actress called Hansa Wadkar. Father could not deal with those problems. He decided to escape by putting a distance between himself and Raghunath. And so we moved to Kolhapur, leaving my elder brother in Bombay.

Raghunath loved me dearly. He bought me pastries and sweets, and a fountain pen which I cherished. It was rare for a child to get a pen.

I looked forward to his sudden appearances in school. He would pull me out of class and take me to see movies, mostly English movies. The earliest I saw were silent films. But they were not completely silent. An orchestra sat below the screen and played music right through the show. After that I saw the ‘Talkies’—Laurel and Hardy, Harold Lloyd and Charlie Chaplin.

But when we grew older our temperaments clashed. Communication stopped. Raghunath became an alcoholic and his family left him. He died on the road, a talented and good-hearted man who took a wrong turn and couldn’t find his way back.

I had three uncles on my mother’s side.

The eldest uncle always promised to bring me a white mouse on his next visit. I didn’t care much for mice. But a white mouse! That was something worth having. And so, each time he came, I looked at him eagerly. He would pat himself all over as if he did have something for me—if only he could find it. Wait a minute ... Then I too would begin to search his pockets. Finally, I would burst out, ‘Uncle, where is it?’ He would smile and say, ‘Next time, Papia, next time!’ (Papia was my pet name then.) That next time never came. But I didn’t lose my trust in him. I didn’t get disappointed or angry. The white

mouse was a dream which never became real. I kept believing it would until my uncle died. He was not married and lived alone. No one knew he was dead until neighbours, driven by the smell of rot, broke into his room and found him dead.

The second uncle lost his wits and jumped into a well. The third uncle spent his life in a mental asylum.

Perhaps because of my uncles I developed a liking for cranks and madmen. I loved one old man who often came to see us at home. He was father's friend and had once owned a bookshop. He was almost totally crazy. When he spoke there was no connection between one sentence and another, between one word and the next. This did not disturb me at all. In fact I felt very close to him, because he decided that I was to marry his daughter. He called me 'Javaibapoo'—an affectionate term for son-in law!

As I told you, our family shifted to Kolhapur. A remarkable feature of this journey was that our bus had to halt at Khopoli where we camped for the night. No bus or train could risk the ghats in the dark!

Kolhapur was an important princely state in Maharashtra, headed by a king. The previous ruler had been a social reformer in the Satya shodhak (seekers of truth) movement launched by Mahatma Phule. The state had its hierarchy of ministers and chief ministers. When the Maharaja drove by with an escort of cars, all traffic came to a halt. People got off their vehicles, joined the pedestrians, and went down on their knees. It was an Arabian Nights' fantasy.

And the palace elephants! They became a familiar sight but I never lost my awe of those massive creatures. The horses from the royal stable made a splendid show, too, as they cantered by at unexpected moments.

The Kolhapur race course was right behind our house. From the roof we had an excellent view of the races and the crowds. The royal princes came, the sardars in turbans and suits, or in ochre-coloured 'native' costumes. Sometimes swords slapped their sides as they walked, and shoes curled up at the toes. All this seemed straight out of the movies.

The grandest procession I have seen was the one to honour Lord Linlithgow, the visiting Viceroy. The whole army was there, as were elephants, horses and bands. Another unforgettable scene was the state elephant's corpse, dragged to the race course on an enormous, specially designed cart. The race course was also the scene of hard labour for the convicts. Once, when the Gandhian freedom fighter Madhavrao Bagal was among the prisoners, the crowds which lined the streets to watch him march by were as thick as when the Viceroy came to visit us.

Then there was Akkabai Saheb, the Maharaja's sister, who often rode into town on a horse-drawn buggy. She handled the reins herself with the coachman sitting by her side. She had some ailment—partial paralysis or Parkinson's disease, which made her tremble violently all the time. She looked quite wicked. Pandemonium broke loose if she came on market days. When the street hawkers sighted her, they grabbed their wares (mainly chicken and sheep) and ran in all directions. Some would try to hide in the houses, including ours. She picked up what she liked without paying for anything. This weekly panic was as good as a comic show.

You may not believe this. But on Saturday mornings when I walked to school, I met cheetahs on the way. They were the royal pets. Eyes covered, a piece of flesh held out in front to make them follow in a straight line, these cheetahs were exercised like dogs. But their muscles rippled and their black spots gleamed in the morning sun— you could smell their ferocity.

The Kolhapur school had a character of its own. It catered to a mixed bunch of kids—from the homes of lorry drivers, labourers, shopkeepers and office *babus*. In addition, flocks of children from the palace came in state cars. They were the favoured species, called ‘sarkari’ children. They got the best seats in class and top marks. Question papers were revealed to them for a fee.

Another peculiar practice was that the entire school had to stand up whenever an old student called Chandrakant dropped in. He was a famous actor of Marathi mythological films. His younger brother Suryakant was also to become a film star. He was then the dullest looking boy in my class. He sat in the last row and was left undisturbed by the teachers.

It was in Kolhapur that I first tasted the delights of a playground. I spent the evenings there playing cricket. Though I played a lot, at no time in my life was I good at any game.

I must admit that I was more innocent than boys of my age. I was teased unmercifully for it. We had four or five girls in the class. One boy had managed to get hold of a photograph of one of based in Kolhapur. It made Marathi films starring Master Vinayak and Baburao Pendharkar. The company’s production manager was my brother’s friend and our neighbour. He invited us to film shows. I was at the premier of *Tukaram*, which is rated a classic of its kind.

I was often allowed into the studios to watch the shooting. And what do you know; I can claim I was a child artist in two Marathi films! Yes, when a child was needed for a scene or two I found myself in front of the camera.

Our family next shifted to Pune. At thirteen I was put into a new school with an upper-caste Brahmin atmosphere. I might have gone through all the years of high school and ended up with a Matriculation Certificate. But in 1942, the Quit India Movement changed the lives of thousands of students all over the country. I was among those who answered Gandhi’s call to boycott school. It was part of the campaign to end British rule in India. Even before taking that step I had enjoyed attending secret meetings and distributing seditious pamphlets. Sedition was a commonly used word then. It meant doing things against the British government. To me all this was pure adventure.

The underground leaders of the freedom movement addressed us at meetings which were held at 3 or 4 o’clock in the morning. I put the clock back by a couple of hours each night, so that my mother thought I was going out at 5 a.m. for my early morning jog. Before the family was up, I was back, in good time to put the clock right.

At one such meeting a sudden raid landed me at the police station. I was fourteen years old, a minor. Therefore father was called, given a severe warning and I was let off. That was when father told me curtly that I must never do such things again, as he had given his word to the police authorities to that effect. He was a god-fearing man. He probably feared the police more than the gods.

And so I returned to school. But I had fallen far behind in my studies. English had been my strong subject but even there I was in hot water. My English teacher baited me rather cruelly in the classroom. He would make me stand on the bench, or leave the class. After a point I could take it no more. I began to cut classes, at first half days, and then whole days. I was given money each month to pay the school fees. I spent it watching films. Sometimes I didn't follow all the dialogues in the English films. But I remembered every film shot by shot because, to kill school hours, I saw a film twice, or even thrice. And I developed a photographic memory!

I spent the rest of the time at the city library. No one disturbed me there, not even when I snatched forty winks on the comfortable armchair. In my wakeful hours at the library I read a lot. Later, when I became a journalist I was surprised at the amount of good reading I had put in!

My parents finally discovered what I had been doing. They did not beat me or scold me but it was the end of all communication between us. They grieved about my future.

Father was an astrologer of sorts. I remember his face, wrinkled with worry, as he frowned over my horoscope for hours, and discussed my future with everybody. A professional astrologer announced that at the most I could hope for a lowly post in the municipality, nothing more. Though he did not agree, father was badly shaken by this prediction.

I don't believe in gurus and swamis. But I think young people should have role models to inspire them. I had two such persons in Pune, both well-known names in Marathi literature.

Dinkar Balkrishna Mokashi was a radio mechanic. He was also a fine writer. But he did not put on airs. There was no cultivated image or pose, no difference between the man he was and the kind of writing he did. Anybody could walk into his shop and discuss his books with him.

Mokashi's lifestyle was Spartan. He made do with two sets of clothes. He and his wife shared a ladies' cycle and a ladies' umbrella between them! I had many chats with him under that umbrella, as we walked in the rain together. I don't write like him but he influenced me by his personality and the informality of his writing. And what did he think of me when I became a writer? Nothing, because he never read what other Marathi writers wrote! He read only English books, mostly serious non-fiction.

My other role model was Vishnu Vinayak Bokil, whose stories were often turned into successful films. He was my Marathi teacher in school. I read all his books. He was one of the first to write Marathi as it is spoken in everyday life. Until then, written Marathi had been very different. At times he wrote what others would not have written at all. He had a light-hearted, jovial and exuberant style which I adored. What struck me even more was that there was absolutely no difference between the way he wrote his stories, taught in class, or talked if we happened to meet him on the street.

On day one he told the class, 'Get up and go to the school board which lists the rank holders of each year.'

When we returned to our seats after this exercise Bokil asked us, 'Where are those top rankers now? Does anyone know?'

Letting our silence sink in, he continued, ‘I always passed every class “standing on the footboard”. Couldn’t even manage to squeeze into the bus. But I am someone today. People know my name and my work. Pass exams because your parents pay the school fees. But don’t think that marks mean everything. Look around you and develop yourselves in other directions.’

Bokil hardly taught lessons seriously. He talked and discussed many things with us. Like Mokashi he had a charming smile. It had a naughty glint as well.

The day before the final examinations, all the teachers put us through the torture of revision. When Bokil finally came in to take his class we threw our pens down and shouted we had had enough of lessons, we wouldn’t study any more. The principal was then making his rounds.

‘How dare you dictate to your teacher?’ Bokil thundered at us. ‘Open your books at once.’ He grabbed the text book from a boy in front (Bokil never brought anything to class), and told the monitor to shut the doors, windows, even the top shutters. Then his voice changed completely. ‘All right boys, tell me now, what shall we do?’

A film for adults only, based on Bokil’s story, was playing in town. We begged him to tell us that story.

‘Damn you, I’ll be dismissed from school,’ says he, and at once plunges into the story! The bell rings before he can finish. Bokil hears our beseeching cries. He goes out, talks to the teacher of our next class and returns. He shuts the door, finishes the story and sums up. ‘Now forget the story. Revise at home and do your papers well tomorrow.’

Years later, I dedicated one of my books to Bokil and sent him a copy. He wrote back saying he felt honoured and rather surprised to be remembered after so many years. And then he added, ‘Shall I tell you something? You write better than I do.’

I have preserved that letter.

At sixteen I had left school for good and was mooning around the house most of the time. Or wandering through the streets. I had no friends. Communication with my family, even with my mother, was non-existent.

At that point my writing acquired a conscious motivation. I had to communicate, I was desperate for dialogue. It could only be with myself. On paper I wrote poems, stories, even film-scripts. I knew they would never see the light of print, nor be seen by any eyes but my own.

That is when I had the maximum number of love affairs. All one-sided and imaginary, of course. Every girl I saw anywhere at all became my dream girl and I constantly fantasized meetings and talks with her!

Do you see that boy on the balcony? Lanky, brooding, slouching, a vacant look in his eyes?

The curtain falls on his childhood. Slowly and reluctantly, he is getting pushed to a different stage. He is lost in the joys and sorrows of a world that he spins out of nothing, in his own mind.

Let us leave him. His feelings are too deep now, his fancies too mixed up for words.

End

